

# Growing Up Ojibwe

## SPEARFISHING ADVENTURES



Join me on a  
Spearfishing Adventure,  
a sequel to  
Growing Up Ojibwe.



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**Boozhoo! (Hello!) My name is Tommy Sky, and I live on the Bad River Reservation in northern Wisconsin. A reservation is an area of land owned by a tribe. This land was kept for the Ojibwe in agreements that tribes made with the United States government in the 1800s.**

**Those agreements are called treaties.**



**Above are the reservations located in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin.**

**I am an Ojibwe Indian. I am eleven years old, and live with my mom and dad in a nice log house on the reservation. I have one little sister, Annie. Thank goodness only one!**



**I am pretty excited because it's ziigwan (springtime). April is usually when we can go spearfishing, and tonight we get to go! We call this exercising a treaty right, a right to continue to hunt, fish, and gather on lands and waters that were sold in those agreements called treaties.**



**My people—the Ojibwe—have always speared fish in the early spring just after the ice goes out. They call it wa-swa-goning, fishing by torchlight. The torches were fastened to the bow of the birch bark canoe.**



**The points on the spears were made from bone. The spring spearing season is very important because it's one of the first chances for my people to get a lot of fresh food after a long winter.**



**anit**  
**(fish spear)**

**The time for spring spearing is just after the ice breaks up around the shores of the lakes.**



**We spear mostly for walleye, called ogaa in Ojibwe, and usually get a few northern pike and sometimes a muskie too. We spear in the shallows close to shore where walleye have come in to lay eggs, or spawn.**



**ogaa**  
(walleye)



**ginoozhe**  
(northern pike)



**maashkinoozhi**  
(muskellunge)



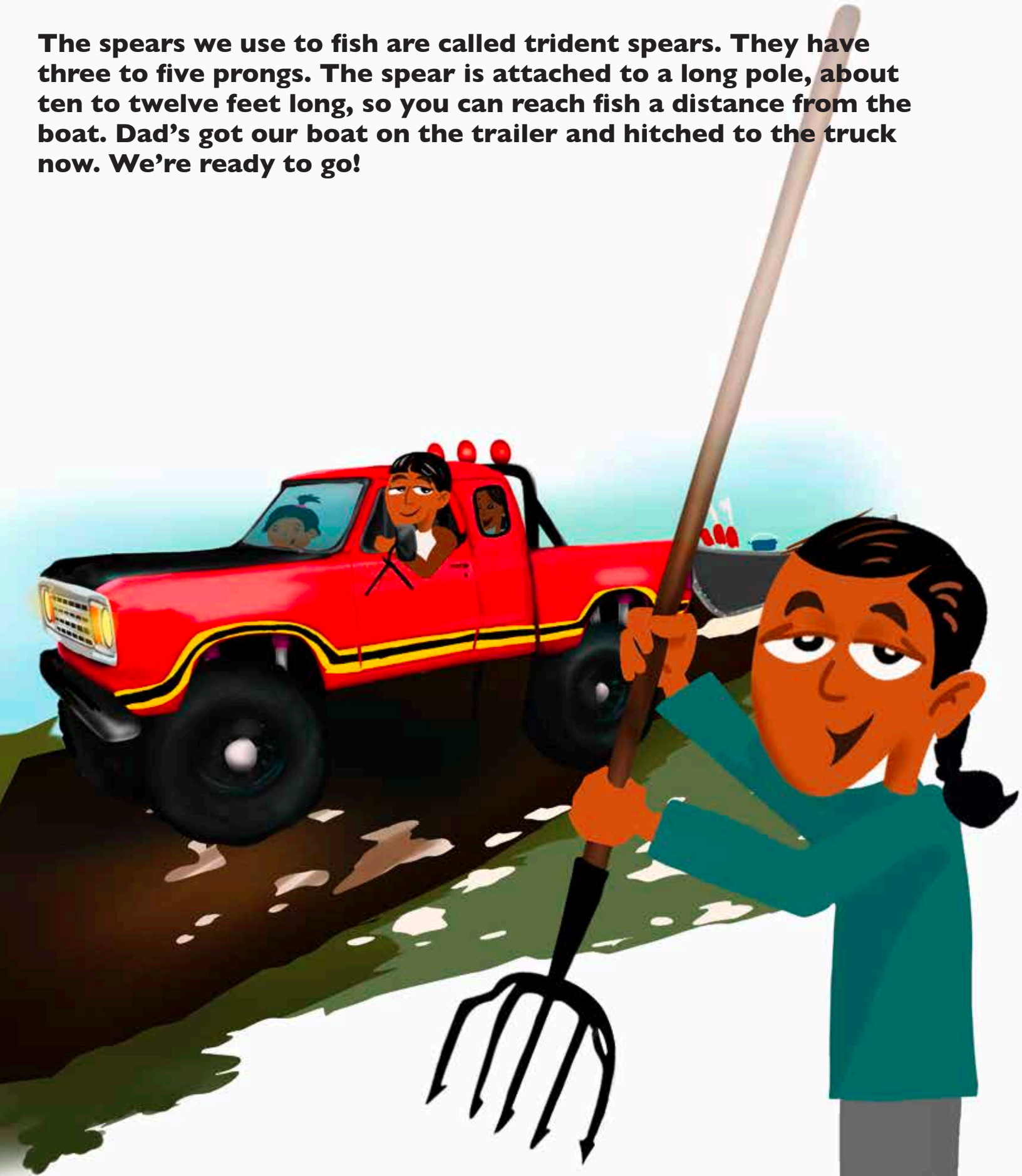


**We also set some nets on certain lakes every year. We mark them and check them at least once a day.**



**Last spring my dad let Annie and I go spearing with him for the first time, but we could only watch. This year I get to try it on my own, and I can hardly wait! Dad made a special spear for me.**

**The spears we use to fish are called trident spears. They have three to five prongs. The spear is attached to a long pole, about ten to twelve feet long, so you can reach fish a distance from the boat. Dad's got our boat on the trailer and hitched to the truck now. We're ready to go!**





**We usually leave for the lake around 4:30 p.m., depending on how far we have to go. We can't go to just any lake. Each day the tribe names certain lakes that will be open for spearing that night. We can only go to those lakes, and must take our fish to a specific location once caught. It is usually one of the landings on the lake.**

**At these landings, workers count and measure the fish we caught before we can leave and go home. These workers are called creel clerks.**



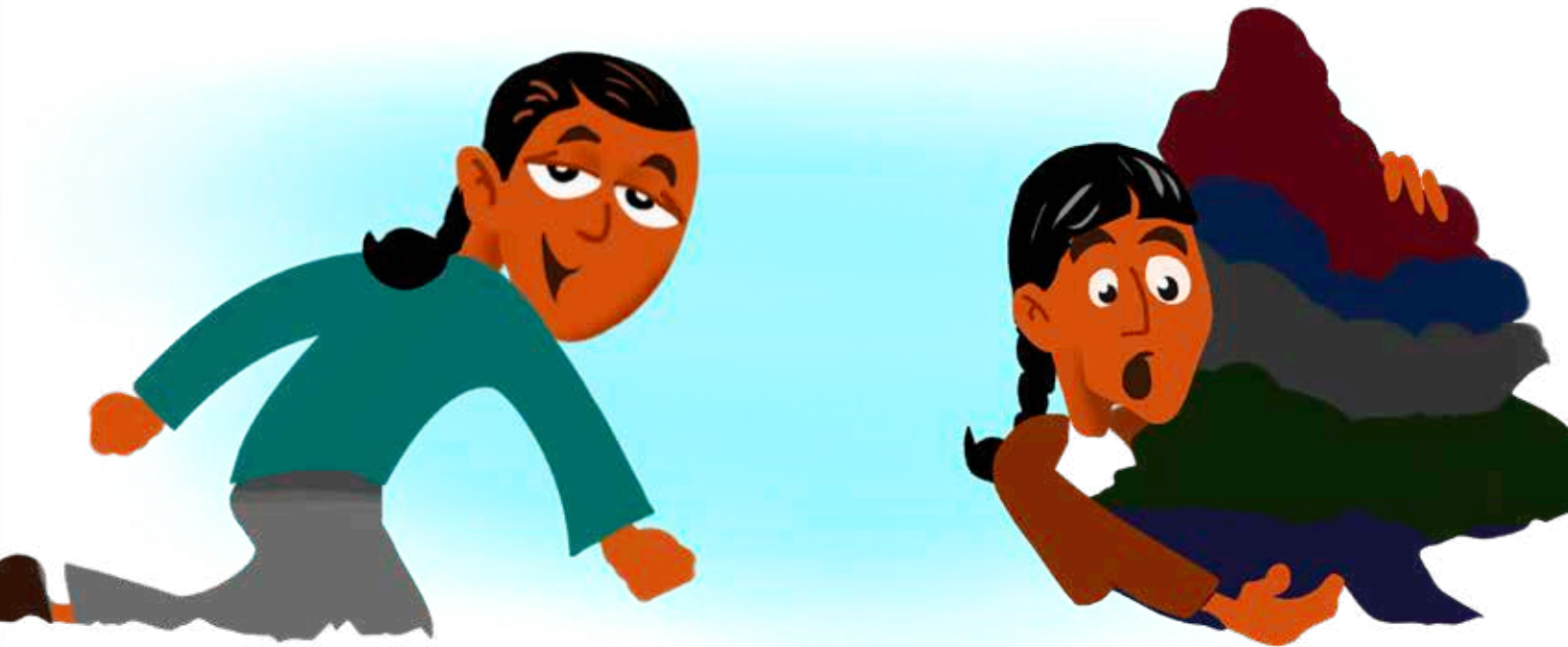
**Wardens, like police officers, are also there and will give people a ticket, or citation, if they spear too many fish or bring in fish that are over the size limit. You see, our spearfishing season has lots of rules. You have to show your tribal I.D. (identification) and get a permit. You will be told what the bag limit is, or how many fish are allowed for each permit that night.**



**And in Wisconsin, you can only take two fish over 20 inches. If you goof up, you get a ticket. My uncle Tim got a citation last year for one too many fish over 20 inches. Dad says the size limit helps make sure not too many female fish are taken. They are usually the bigger fish, which have come close to shore to lay their eggs. The size limit makes sure more of the smaller male fish are taken instead.**



**Oops! Gotta get moving. Dad's calling me to come help load up. We gotta bring a bunch of stuff. For one thing, it's cold. You don't start spearing until it's dark. With the ice just gone from the lake, the water and night air are still very cold. So we have to load up snow pants, heavy jackets, hats, waterproof boots, life jackets, and fish buckets. We also have to remember headlamps.**



**The headlamps are bright lights attached to the front of a helmet, so you can shine down into the water without holding a light in your hand. The light reflects off the large, round eyes of walleye just beneath the water. Mom usually packs some sandwiches and some hot coffee for dad and hot chocolate for Annie and me.**



Once we have all the gear in the boat and tied down, we load into the truck and head down the road to Lake Namekagon, about 40 miles from our house. That lake has an Ojibwe name. It means place of the sturgeon. We call sturgeon “namé” in Ojibwe. The “e” sounds like an “a”—nah-may.



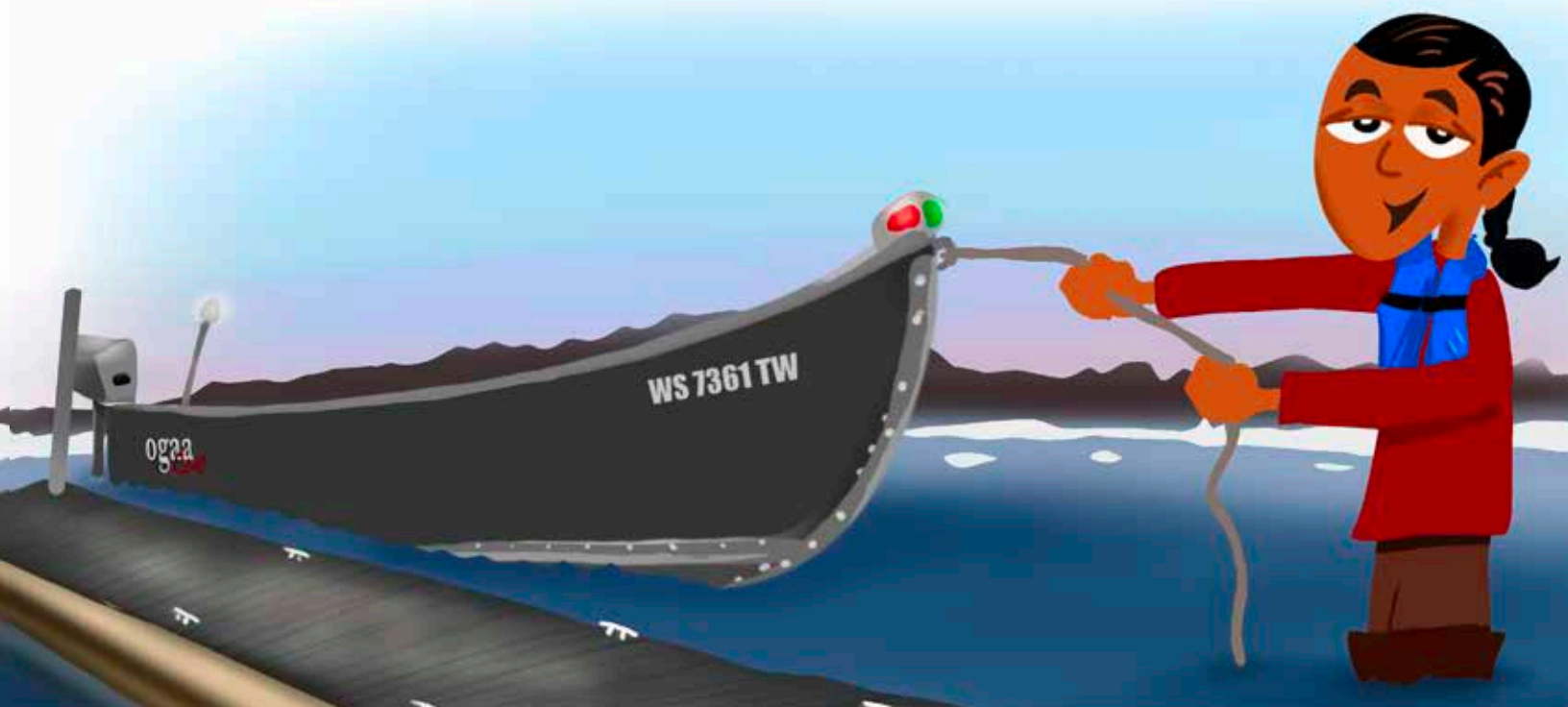
When we have arrived at Lake Namekagon the first thing we do is offer asemaa (tobacco) and pray for a good, safe harvest.



**When we get to the landing, the creel clerks are there, and we get our permits. We each can take 20 walleyes tonight. Dad says each lake has a total number of walleye that our tribe can take by spearing. That's called a quota. Once we reach that number, the lake is closed to us for the season, except for hook-and-line.**



**We got our permits and are ready to launch. I get into the boat and dad backs the boat into the water while mom watches and tells him when to stop. The boat is in deep enough water to float, so they unhook it from the trailer, and I jump from the bow onto the landing with a rope in hand. I lead the boat around to the side of the dock and wait for dad.**



**We shove off from the dock when it's almost dark. Two other boats have already headed to the far side of the lake. We're lucky because it is very calm tonight.**



**We start to look for fish right away. I'm standing up on the bow of the boat with my headlight on and spear in hand. I turn my head slowly pointing the light into the water and scanning for the sight of those shining walleye eyes. "Watch out!" dad yells suddenly. "Duck!" I duck just in time to avoid a large tree limb hanging out over the water. I was too busy looking down into the lake and didn't see the big branch that would have knocked me into the water. Close call!**



**No sign of walleye yet. We keep trolling, patiently looking. We round a bend and head into a small bay, scaring a beaver that plunges into the water and swims away. An owl hoots softly from the trees. Otherwise, it's very still and quiet except for the motor of our boat.**



**At last I spot the shining eyes, not far in front of the boat and to the left. I ready my spear as the boat moves closer. I can see the fish, a gray form, tail moving slightly as it hovers in the shallows. It looks like a nice size fish, not too big. I want to hit it right in the back of the head, not put my spear through the body. I aim and thrust my spear quickly before the fish swims away. Clank! The spear hit a rock instead of the fish. I can see it dart away, scared by the splash.**



**“That’s ok, Tommy. It takes practice. Remember you have to learn to adjust distance a bit because you are seeing the fish through water and that makes it look closer than it really is—the water distorts, or changes, what we actually see,” dad says. We keep trolling, heading deeper into the bay, following the shoreline closely.**



**Soon I see several pairs of shining eyes. We’re in a good spot! I let dad know there are fish ahead. He cuts the motor down even more. We quickly drift in towards the eyes. I thrust again...and miss! Wow, this is pretty hard. I was sure I would get that one. We keep going—more shining eyes. My spear hits the water, and more fish scatter. Nothing is on the end of my spear.**





**“Dad, I can’t do this. I wonder if this spear is bent or something?”  
Something has to be goofed up—couldn’t be me. “No, Tommy, the  
spear is just fine. Just keep trying.”**



**We putt over to the other side of the bay and find more fish in the shallows. Wham! I shove my spear at a big one and walla! I got one. Quickly I bring it into the boat and plop it into the bucket. At last! Dad’s grinning and so am I. An hour ticks by and I manage to pull in five more pretty nice size walleye and miss a lot more.**



**Now we think it's time for dad to have a try, so we switch places, and he puts on the headlamp and grabs a full sized spear. I man the motor. This I have practiced quite a bit.**



**We turn the boat and go back through the little bay where we had noticed quite a few fish. Dad waves at me to slow down. He sees a fish. I cut the motor back and watch. Wham! Dad brings one up and quickly flips it into the bucket. A minute later, wham again! Another one comes in. This seems to go a lot better with me at the motor and him up front. It didn't take us long, and dad had his 20 fish in the bucket.**



**It's getting late, so even though I only got six out of the 20 I could get, we decided to call it for the night. We pull up at the dock, I jump out and tie up the boat. We unload and together carry the bucket with our fish up to the creel clerk.**



**A warden from the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission, called GLIFWC or GLIF-WIC, is also there and watches on. We had no violations, so we were all clear. Mom and my sister were there waiting for us.**



**My mom and Annie made a little campfire and were keeping warm while they waited, drinking hot chocolate and munching on sandwiches. Mom brought a frying pan, so she was ready to fry up fresh walleye for us over the campfire. That's when they are really good! And dad and I are hungry. The sound and smell of sizzling fish makes me even more hungry, but the hot chocolate warms my belly while I wait. It was chilly out on the lake.**



**“Did you get any of the fish, Tommy?” Annie asks. “Yeah, I got six nice ones,” I say proudly. “Only six after all that time? I could do better than that!” she says grinning. “Oh yeah! Go ahead and try,” I say. She’d probably lose her spear in the water or fall in.**



**We clean up the campsite and head home to clean and fillet the rest of the fish. We all help. Dad fillets, or cuts up the fish, and mom and I wrap. My fish are going to Grandma and Grandpa. We always share with our family when we get fish and also stash some in our freezer.**



**My sister doesn't give me a break and keeps whining to dad that she wants to try spearfishing. "She's only eight," I tell dad. "She can't do that yet," I say. But dad, he gives in. "Okay, tomorrow night you can give it a try," he says.**



**“I’ll drive the boat for her,” I volunteer, thinking it would be fun to “accidentally” put her in the water. But dad says no, he’ll do the steering. Well, that puts me at the campsite with mom tomorrow night.**



**Annie got a ten-pound northern Sunday night. Dad had to help her get it into the boat. They weren’t even out that long. “Beginners luck,” I say.**



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# Growing Up Ojibwe

.....is a story about a young boy who shows the traditional gathering ways of the Ojibwe people.

