

# Dardevle By Eppinger

Made in Michigan...By Bob Vogel

**T**oday the red and white striped Dardevle is possibly the world's most recognizable fishing lure. These famous lures are in every tackle box, and for a good reason, they catch fish! A Canadian fishing guide once told me that if I was not using a Dardevle, I was not serious about catching northern pike.

Lou Eppinger started the Dardevle by Eppinger. At the tender age of 18, Lou inherited from the owner of the taxidermy shop where he was employed. The shop was on Detroit's east side. Lou loved his work, but taxidermy is seasonal at best and wasn't providing much income. Lou needed a way to even out his revenue stream. In 1910 Lou spent twenty-five dollars on fishing tackle to resell in his shop. Twenty-five dollars was a lot of money in

1910, and the investment was risky. But it sure paid off. The fishing tackle side of his business grew, and Lou continued to add more and more selection to this rapidly growing business. One of those new selections would make fishing history for the next 100 years.

There are several accounts of how the Dardevle spoon originated. It is safe to assume that it was a lure that Lou developed over years of experimenting and building prototypes. His goal was to produce a lure that was easy to cast, easy to control, provided action (wiggle), and flat out caught fish. The result of his passion was the Osprey, named after the Osprey Lou thought was the best fisher in the world. The original Osprey was black and white and was first sold in 1917 at Lou's shop.

How the Osprey would later become known as the Dardevle is

interesting. In World War I, German soldiers referred to our marines as devil dogs to compliment the intensity of their fighting abilities. The allied troops picked up on this name and started calling the marines Dare Devils. Lou Eppinger liked the sound of that name. He combined the two words and changed the spelling, thus changing his famous lure from Osprey to Dardevle.

Post-World War I was a great time to be in the sporting goods business. Our soldiers returned home with money in their pockets and ready to purchase hunting, fishing and camping gear.

In 1925 Lou moved his business to a four-story building in downtown Detroit. This impressive building provided space for lure manufacturing, taxidermy, a shooting range, and retail sales of sporting goods. The family tradition that exists today at Eppinger started in 1918 when Lou hired his then thirteen-year-old nephew Ed Eppinger Jr. Ed and Lou worked together into the 1950s when they worked out a buy/sell agreement allowing Ed ownership of the lure manufacturing portion of the business.

What Lou was to the pioneering of fishing tackle, Ed was to promotion. Under Ed's guidance, advertising and lure selections grew. Ed's aggressive promotions included television, films, outdoor writers' endorsements, magazine ads, outdoor sports shows, and conventions. Sales grew such that Ed needed more manufacturing space. Ed moved the factory to Dearborn in 1959. That facility is in operation today on Schaefer Road and is where I met John Cleveland.

John is an interesting guy. He is a fly-fishing instructor, a fishing guide, an award-winning author of outdoor articles, a longbow hunter, and director of marketing for Dardevle of Eppinger. When I met John, it was 9 a.m. He and the 11 other employees of Dardevle had been at work since 6 a.m. They work Monday through Friday from 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. This schedule was a change for John when he came to work at Eppinger's almost



A well used Dardevle spoon made by Eppinger

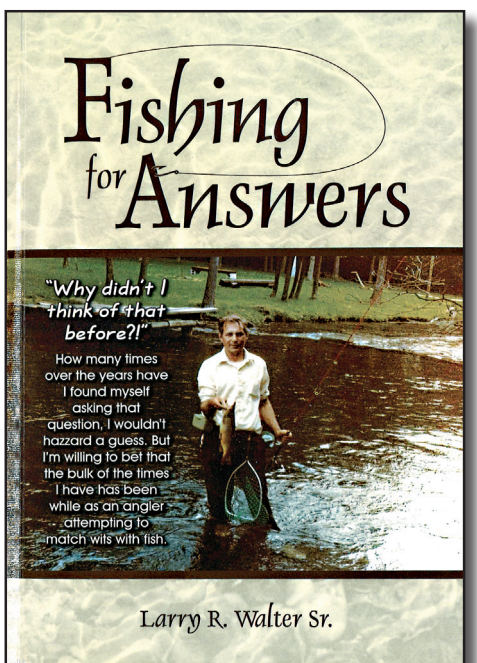
20 years ago. As an ex-restaurantier, he was used to working long hours, late evenings, and weekends. When he asked Karen Eppinger, his boss, what he was to do after 2:30, she told him, in one sentence, what Eppinger is all about. She said, "You go home to your family."

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Since its beginnings, Eppinger has treated their employees like family, made them part of their family, and allowed them a schedule to be with and take care of their families.

I have known of and used Dardevle products for over fifty years. I knew they were distributed and sold throughout North America and the world. Frankly, I was expecting to visit a large modern manufacturing plant. I thought I would see automated production lines powered by technology and robotics. To say I was surprised is an understatement. To say I was underwhelmed is wrong. I was overwhelmed, and overwhelmed with the spirit of a fourth-generation family-owned business with a genuine passion for its products and employees—overwhelmed by their attention to quality and pride in quality. Overwhelmed by their leadership team and each employee I was lucky enough to meet. I was overwhelmed by tradition.

Many manufacturing plants are sterile production facilities where volume and unit costs are measure-

ments of success. All operations at Dardevle are performed by hand. Their products are custom made by employees who have worked for the Eppinger family for thirty-five or more years. Their products are works of art. Their work is a labor of love.

The Dardevle process begins with half hard-brass spoon stampings shipped to the Dearborn plant per John's orders from a vendor in Minnesota. The two companies have a joint operating agreement. Eppinger owns the dies to assure the stamping is of their design, specifications, and quality. Next, the spoon is dipped in a cleaning solution to prepare it for priming or plating. The lures have one of three backs. Those choices are brass, copper or nickel. When the spoon is cleaned, primed, or plated, the hand painting begins. Yes, that is right; the front of each lure is hand-painted. Every color, every design is done by hand. Some spoons will have seven or more coats of primer, paint and lacquer. This process is so intense that the paint on a Dardevle product is guaranteed for the lure's life.

The next process is to stamp the familiar devil head logo onto each lure, assuring the customer that the product they are holding is the real deal, it is a Dardevle, not an imitation. Finally, split rings and hooks are applied. Again, these processes are done by hand. By the end of the process, each Dardevle production employee has touched the product at least once. Each handling involves inspection for family and product quality standards.

With three different backs, numerous sizes and shapes, and multiple color and stripe options, Dardevle lures come in over 17,000 choices. The Dardevle facility in Dearborn is currently producing over 500,000 lures annually. They sell primarily to distributors but do sell directly to some retail outlets. They are now also selling directly to individuals via their new website.

Ed Eppinger turned over the helm of the company to his daughter, Karen, in 1987. The business became the fourth generation when Karen's daughter, Jennifer, joined the company. Jennifer now runs the day to day operations of the business. Jennifer's son, Brian, has recently joined the organization heading up direct sales and website orders. Will he be the fifth genera-



John Cleveland of Eppinger's on a north adventure with Dardevle lures.

tion to head up the family-owned business?

As director of marketing, John Cleveland has been tasked with rebranding the 115-year-old company. He is doing that by attaching the Eppinger name to Dardevle products and promotions. The Eppinger family, their traditions, their legacy that makes their product, and

their product alone, a Dardevle. I will never tie or snap a spoon on my line again without looking for their devil head logo and remembering the pleasant day I spent with the fine people of Dardevle by Eppinger. As Michiganders, we should all be proud that this company originated and operates today in our great State. It is truly a treasure. ■

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