

People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish

Mike Wendt Oral History

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Interviewer: DR – Dick Ristow

Transcriber: NCC

Dick Ristow: One of the Wendt families or the originators of the Wendt business here. We are at Wendt's on the Lake. So, Mike, to start things off, why don't you tell me a little bit about your family, sisters, brothers, and what your parents did. Give me a little biography just about your own family.

Mike Wendt: Well, see, I was born on Lake Winnebago, just south of Wendt's on the Lake here, about 2 miles. There was my sister who's four years older than I, then myself, and then my younger – next brother who's two years younger, then a younger brother that's seven years younger. My father drove a semi for (Ernie Schmidt?) at one time, for the boating company. Then in 1962, my mother and him had a chance to buy out Karpathian's Tavern.

DR: That's Cynthia?

MW: Yes, Cynthia. They bought out Karpathian's Restaurant – bar at the time.

DR: What was the name of this bar?

MW: Karpathian.

DR: Karpathian.

MW: Yes. Bill and Dorothy Karpathian owned it. It's at the (Colling Line?) Road, [inaudible] on Highway 45. At the time, it was just – I think it was like eight or nine bar stools, and our family all moved in here with my sister and my two brothers and I, my mom and dad and our grandmother. Also, my mother's mother lived with us. So, we were cramped. Well, a lot of the restaurant areas right now, that used to be living quarters, this living room and kitchen over here. So, my father did an addition in [19]64, it was. Then in [19]90 – right 1990, I did an addition to where it is today. At the time, years ago, we didn't have a club per se as far as for fishing. In 1962, my dad bought a truck and a bridge, and we did the plowing of the roads and bridgework and all that, Wendt's on the Lake Restaurant. Then my former wife Linda and I bought it in 1978. Then we continued taking care of the roads on the lake, and the West Shore Fishing Club met kitty-corner to us. It was Tanks Bar at the time. Then it went to Miller's Bar and Jerry's Bar. Then it burnt down. Now, it's a gas station kitty-corner to us. Now, in 1991, I left the restaurant business. My former wife and I went through a divorce. We gave our truck and bridges and all our work that we had from as far as on the lake, over to the West Shore Fishing Club. They meet here now. It's a good organization. They have a nice clubhouse or a warehouse up the road here. We keep the trucks inside. It's going really well as far as the fishing, the snow removal with the lake and everything and got a lot of dedicated members and that.

DR: Did you spear back then, or you're just working full here?

MW: Normally, what would happen is I worked with my parents when I first got out of high school. I used to – with being in the restaurant business – once a week, get out. That continued after we bought the restaurant in 1978. We tried to get out on Tuesdays, was our day off from the restaurant. Of course, most of your businesses around the lake, they, you know, depended on that winter sturgeon spearing season, which ran from, the beginning of February all the way to

March first of every year. What a lot of spearers don't realize – they are kind of spoiled – in 1988, the city sewer run out on the west shore of Lake Winnebago and runs from far to the county line, and from the county line – Winnebago county line to Oshkosh. It's covered a lot of the lake around the whole area. I don't think there's much that's not city sewer anymore, which has helped the lake greatly. We used to –you'd have the algae with snow cover, and it made the clarity of the lake poor. But also, that was the sewer there which you probably know was – most of your homes around the lake years ago were just cottages, summer cottages. People would come along, and they'd add on to it, like we did here in the business ourselves. Septic systems at the time changed much to the addition. Of course, the DNR came in. They put the city's sanitary districts throughout the colonies and townships, and it has majorly changed this lake. Clarity is – I can remember on Lake Winnebago, looking at the Sturgeon for Tomorrow brochures, you'd see the registration from years ago. Sometimes eight fish off the lake, sometimes twenty-four fish off the lake, I can remember. The clarity was not all that good every year. Not like we've had that. This year, of course, 2006, it wasn't as good as it has been. We did go the whole season, but we've had the seasons with this one- and two- and three-day seasons. I never thought, three years ago, the season was – that I'd see people in line – three lines of fish for three hours to register and be waiting to get the fish registered. Never have I done that in a million years since I was raised in this restaurant.

DR: Did you personally spear?

MW: Yes. Like I said, I started since I was fourteen. I sat with other people before that. Years ago, we had the old cars on the lake and ran around. Nowadays, people take new vehicles out there and think nothing out of it. But we'd all have an old fishing car years ago to be running around there. I can remember like twelve years old and thirteen years old, the older people that came to the restaurant at the time, I'd be by them, and they'd let me run around with their car on the lake. So, yes. I started, I remember I was like thirteen or fourteen. A friend of ours that lived on a road here, Lois Ninnemann had a fish on, and she was yelling for help. I wasn't fourteen yet, driving this car around. I stopped and helped her get the fish out. Yes. So, I speared since – legally – at fourteen. I guess my largest fish ever was 58 pounds that I speared and maybe got a dozen through those years. But like I said, years ago when the restaurant was always set on Tuesdays, one day a week. Now, I have worked for Stuart's Landscaping since the year 2000, and being laid off during the winter, we're out there just about every day, which is really nice.

DR: What are some of the things you can reflect back on that were challenging or exciting to you over the years in spearing?

MW: Well, spearing-wise, I guess the one time was – I know you're going to interview with my son Sean – he was like four or five years old, which a lot of people take the little guys along with them are girls. We were sitting there. I was explaining to him as we're looking down the hole, a school of perch came in the hole at the time. I said, "Oh." I said, "Sean, that's a good sign." You see a school of perch like that. Normally, they're following the sturgeon. The sturgeon will be rolling up the mud as they feed, and the perch will feed with them. I no more said that and the head of the fish came into the hole and right below us. There was perch all around to fish at the time. We speared it, got it, brought it up. I think they have a tape measure. At that time, I think

they had to be 36 inches in, which they do now, but there was an increase in size limit after that. I was hoping for some of our friends to come by. So, I hit the fish on its head and put it underneath the floor of the shanty. I said to him, "If anybody comes in, you tell him we didn't see nothing. We didn't see nothing." He's, like I said, five years old at the time, I'd say. You can ask him about this. A friend of ours stopped by. So, he came in the shanty, and he asked if we saw anything. Shawn says, "No, we didn't see anything. Nothing at all." I said, "Sean, don't worry. It's okay." So, like I said, that was a friend of ours. I said, "Shawn, we can tell him." Luckily, he went and got the tape, and it was long enough. I don't know if that's some spearing – I said my largest 58 lbs. Since then, my wife now, got a – three years ago, a 92- pounder. So, she's got the largest one in our family. Her name is Mary Wendt. So, with being in the restaurant and taking care of the lake, it was hard at times for doing any more spearing than that.

DR: How do you like to prepare your fish for eating?

MW: What we like to do is smoked is one way, but the other way is fried. I think a big secret – my wife, Mary, does this now, and she taught me this – that the main thing is to get all the yellow off for frying. You need to – we actually steak them out. Then I cut them into square pieces, maybe inch square. You waste a lot. But anything that's yellow needs to come off that fish, you'll get rid of a lot of this. Especially nowadays, with the fish feeding on the shad, it really makes a difference. Then we'll soak them in milk over the evening, overnight, and that milk will turn completely yellow. Even if you get the yellow off all the fish, you know, it'll still be completely yellow. The milk draws out that oily taste. Then we bread them like you would regular fish and pan fry with olive oil, put those in a pan. You can roast them on a grill too or in your oven, that way too. But the main thing is all that yellow needs to come off if you want to fry them.

DR: Oh, interesting. Jake told me the same thing about preparing them since they've been eating shad.

MW: Yes.

DR: What are some of the most unusual characters that you've met out of your fishing experience?

MW: Oh, let's see. There's been different people. I guess I have to think about that. I don't know. There's duck hunting. Bob probably told you – Jake – that he had different people that came in the restaurant who were duck hunting – unusual sturgeon. Let's see. I'd have to think about that.

DR: I'm sure across the bar when you were tending bar, you've heard all kinds of illegal stories, so to speak, that some of them are of interest to you or that you could recall.

MW: Other than I know one time a gentleman got like a 60-, 70-pound muskie by mistake – that was years ago – and mistook it for surgeon. There's been people that have done that with carp and other rough fish and all. But I just remember that one time, and the fellow was really sick about it. They're illegal. I think what a lot of people – actually, Sturgeon for Tomorrow started.

If they did something illegal, sometimes they wouldn't think they'd tell me. Because I used to be president of – or director for – treasurer and then president of the Sturgeon for Tomorrow. I think that they kind of tend to shy away from telling me all the stories anymore.

DR: What chapter started here?

MW: The Southwest Chapter. Actually, a little story behind it, when I came out from Sturgeon for Tomorrow, was years ago, I'm sure Bill Casper and everybody else can tell you the whole story about everything. But I just know that Bob Blanck Sr., he had Blanck Supper Club on Johnsbury. He funded \$10,000 upfront to get Professor Ballard here from Baltimore, Maryland to go through the information. I went to the hearing and said they had that shore [inaudible] the Department of Natural Resources. Dan Folz was the head biologist at the time. He had some information and all these films from Russia with Professor Ballard in it. He was over there and went through and showed how they propagate the sturgeon, how they removed the eggs and the sperm from the fish and artificially fertilized the eggs and started the yearlings and everything. So, they had a bill out there about – like I said, of \$10,000 that Bob Blanck funded for this. I remember that when I was in Wendt's here, they sold tickets that first year, raffle tickets. They wanted to pay him back somehow for what he put upfront. They sold raffle tickets. Then we were charting an airplane full of people out of Oshkosh to Las Vegas. Bob went along with his wife Hazel, and we got talking about this. He said the raffle tickets didn't go that great. Then I suggested they – and maybe, down the line, somebody would have suggested it anyways – is having a dinner like a Ducks Unlimited dinner. He thought it was a good idea and everything. I know that following winter, they had the first dinner at Kiel in which they hadn't yet. I approached – we went – I remember my former wife and I, Linda, and my mother and dad went to the dinner, first dinner. We really were impressed by it. The next year, we went to it. I mentioned to Bill Casper that we'd be interested in starting – forming a chapter on the West Shore. He said, "Well, why don't you get a committee together, and we'll meet with you. We'll discuss this – how you would like it to work." The committee then was – I had Dave Dombrowski, who, south of us, had a restaurant at the time called (Pack a Mackets?), and he would pile out from there. Then Wayne Hoelzel, he was up from Neenah. He was a president of the Paynes Point Club. Lee Patt, he was the president at the time of the Van Dyne Sportsman's Club. Mike Schrage, he was with the DNR, and I'd like him to go along with it. I thought he – and Glenn Ninneman, who was the secretary or treasurer of the Van Dyne Sportsman's Club. Then myself and Jerry (Orrick?), he was the president of the West Shore Fishing Club at the time and met across the street from us. Then my father. So, that was our committee. I wanted everybody that worked on the West Shore that took care of something to do with the fishing – the fishermen. It worked out pretty good. So, we had our first committee meeting. We elected my father as the first president then. I was the treasurer. Then later years, when my father retired, I became the president of The Southwest Chapter of Sturgeon for Tomorrow until 1991. Jim Patt is now – Lee's son – is the president. What's nice is with the Southwest Chapter, my son-in-law, my daughter, my son, and his wife and former wife, Linda, they're all active with it, and they're all active with the Wendt's on the Lake restaurant. So, it worked all good.

DR: Good. Interesting. A lot of history there. When you were spearing, what were your favorite decoys or tricks to luring a sturgeon?

MW: Well, I guess I like that – I usually like white decoys. I guess it's showing up better. In the years [inaudible] clarity wasn't all that good. Otherwise, if we had a clear year, I'd go with a darker decoy, and a lighter one when clarity wasn't good. I can remember years ago – the young people right now – I remember putting eggshells down and slices of potatoes and [inaudible], which were all biodegradable. But it's all been, you know, outlawed now. I guess the other thing I really miss is that you could fish for the perch and other fish through the sturgeon hole. I understand, might end up being a problem with that because of that one season especially. But we, Shawn and I, for three, four seasons, after our season close, we went up to Michigan and speared up there by Cheboygan. There's Mullett, Baron, Black Lake. There, they still allow fishing in the sturgeon hole or actually sturgeon hole, northern and muskies you could spear. That was just – perch fishing was just great. I love to watch them come in and bite on the hook. That's a lot of fun.

DR: Over the years, you folks rented shanties. Is that a pretty good business?

MW: Well, what it was is we had our regular customers. They didn't want to invest in maybe the shanty and the equipment and all that. Then we had people that were from out of town that didn't want to invest in shanties and all that. Being that we used to have the whole season or the whole month of February, we could rent them off for \$20.00 to \$25.00 a day. My dad did, and I did. Then, like I said in [19]88, the seasons changed. So, after the city sewer, we had so many years of clear water. We had all the caps put on the fish. So, we end up getting sometimes one and two days only seasons. What happened is, we had – Shawn can tell you how he had it increased up to \$250.00 a day. You hated to have to charge people this, but it's to the point where, if you go through all the work of getting the shanty out of summer location, and I'll pull it out in the lake, sometimes there's snow. You had to plow, set them up, saw the holes, and get them already to go and make sure the heaters all worked and whatever. Then that's a two-day season and then send them all back away. You almost have to do that because you're working out for four or five days prior to the season getting a lot of time involved with that. So, you know, that's changed a lot this season. Of course, this year is a different year than back in 2006. Because we did get the whole season. But sure, it could be altogether different. It could be over again in two days if they had clear water. Conditions weren't all that good this year either. I was sure we had to use snowmobiles on the East shore. They were using vehicles. The difference in the ice conditions, thickness. When you asked about different people that we sturgeon fished with, we had regular friends that did a lot of sturgeon fishing. I just recall one of the Hughes were big sturgeon fishermen from Oshkosh area. He has (chief?) equipment, Jack Hughes and his wife. I remember the first sturgeon he got there, they had about five, six people in the shanty and the first sturgeon they ever saw in the hole, got all excited, and the fish came in the hole, and they had a dog in there. The dog got pushed in the hole and swimming around and (shitting?) in the hole as they threw the spear. It was a quite exciting story. But that's friends of ours that had that.

DR: Very interesting. Looking back, of all the years of spearing as a sport, what memory comes to you that probably stayed with you?

MW: Oh, I know, in the year – I think it was in the year 1971. I'll never forget this. We always put all this line of rope out here to a hang the sturgeon on years ago. We still do. To this day,

we do. That was a Monday that year. It was – people had set up off of Point Comfort area. Point Comfort area always seems to be a fairly decent area which is north of here, heading up towards the river in Oshkosh. But normally, you can't get clear years of water there, but they did that year. I remember on that Monday, there were eleven fish that hung on the rope out here, weighed 700 pounds, and there were some dandies in that. The (Packard?) family from – in fact, he's still the sheriff of our county. They had set up there, and the (Friese?) family. They didn't – they were seeing fish there all the time until (deadened?) out. We heard about it. There was [inaudible] had moved on after they started registering the fish there. That was probably – weight wise for eleven fish was 700 – over 700 pounds. It was really unbelievable. Another story [inaudible]. I can't remember. They were off the northeast of the island out here. They brought in a fish that was 104 pounds that year. They swear that they had the two of them come side by side, and they both are almost identical. They just looked – they thought they both were all the same, and they got the one. Of course, when she's throwing the spear, that's it for the other one, you know.

DR: Well, at least you kept the tradition going with your son.

MW: Yes. He can tell you he's the treasurer of the South or the West Shore Fishing Club. I was the director, but I resigned now. He's doing good with – we all kind of work – I still help with all of the plowing and moving the bridges with the club and that. With the restaurant business, he's helping his mother out, managing with her in the restaurant business. They're doing good in the restaurant too.

DR: Very good. Thank you for your interview and good luck in the future.

MW: Thank you, Richard.

DR: Thank you.

[end of transcript]