

People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish
Cynthia Wendt Oral History
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Interviewer: DR – Dick Ristow
Transcriber: NCC

Dick Ristow: Today, we're with Cynthia Wendt at Wendt's on the Lake on Fond du Lac Road, South of Oshkosh. Cynthia has written a dissertation about the history of herself and the sturgeon program that as she has seen it. She's going to read that into the recording and then we'll continue the interview from there. Go ahead, Cynthia.

Cynthia Wendt: I began sturgeon spearing in the late 1950s with my husband Fritz, as everyone called him. In those years, everyone speared on the east shore of Lake Winnebago. They claimed there weren't any signs of sturgeon on the west shore. So, no one ever started a club or access to the lake. In 1962, Fritz and I bought the corner tavern known as Karpathians at Highway 45 North and Lone Elm Road. We soon started a fishing club, bought a truck and plow, built bridges to cross the cracks, and it wasn't too long and there was proof there were plenty of sturgeon on the west shore. I have a scrapbook with about a hundred articles and pictures in the newspapers dating back to 1913 and ending in 2004, with the largest for Lake Winnebago at 188 pounds. I speared my largest one in 1964, which was 71 pounds, when I was 38 years old. Sitting alone, I tried to gaff it, lost the gaff in the water, so calling for help, and nobody heard me. I managed to get it on the floor and on my hands and knees, dragged him out on the ice. In 1980, I speared a 64-pounder, and the lady sitting with me gaffed it for me. That same day, Fritz speared a 41-pounder, which is on the wall at Wendt's on the Lake. My son, Doug, that day got a 21 pounder – all three in different shanties. Fritz helped begin Sturgeon for Tomorrow Southwest Chapter in 1981 and was their first president. I have a picture in the scrapbook and an article written of a sturgeon, 187.5 pounds, taken on a setline, which was legal back in 1913. Wisconsin Conservation records show the largest sturgeon ever taken in this state was 211 pounds caught by Glen Marsh in 1910 in the Namekagon River in northwest Wisconsin. The method of capture was not recorded. The Wendt family are all interested in sturgeon spearing as soon as they reach the legal age for a tag. My children, Donna Klein, Mike Wendt, Tom Wendt, and Doug Wendt, their families, and spouses, my thirteen grandchildren, most of them go spearing and have been lucky. When Fritz and I had the bar, we took a picture of anyone who hung their sturgeon on the pole. I have two albums of them. Anyone interested in seeing my scrapbook can give me a call, and I will bring it to Wendt's on the Lake. My phone number is 929-6418.

DR: Cynthia, having just read that into the recorder, how did you learn this activity about spearing?

CW: Well, I had never done it at all until I met my husband. We were married in 1946. Soon after that, in the 1950s, he was interested in it. So, I started it with him and kept on all the years since then. I missed a few years when I was in Texas at that time of the year. But now that I'm back again, I go every year with the kids most of the time. This year, I didn't have a tag, which I'm glad in a way. I didn't have to have one because it wasn't that great.

DR: What problems and challenges have you found in this sport?

CW: Well, sometimes the challenges are that you go out on that lake, and it isn't too great. Sometimes you take chances. Going back way to the first years that I went, and we fished on the east shore, nobody had bridges or anything, those years. We had to jump the cracks. We had old cars that we used. Sometimes we were out there, and a snowstorm started and you kind of

wondered if you're going to get back in. Another time, off of the Cemetery Road, my husband and I went out. The crack was all closed. All of a sudden, when we were going to go in, the crack was open. So, we had to travel back and forth to find a place where we could jump the crack.

DR: I noticed in your photographs, several times in his experiences on the lake, he dropped his truck in.

CW: Yes. That happened a few times. Once, there was a snowmobile with a sled on the back. He went in with that. A couple of other times, it was with the Suburban, but he was always fortunate that it happened in the bay between the Big Island and the (Fraction?). They were sitting on bottom with the back end of the vehicle and usually managed to get them out with help with the wrecker that the club had.

DR: Who do you think is the best spearer that you've ever met? Most successful?

CW: I can tell you, there's lots of people, I think, in my time that have done real well. My son, Doug, is one of the luckiest ones, I think. His picture is in the scrapbook, and it's also – I have photographs of him in my album. It hasn't been too many years since he started spearing that that he didn't get one. Now his grandson – I mean my grandson, his son, is doing it, and he's been lucky. He's speared five already, and he's 23 years old.

DR: Oh, that is good. What are some of the tricks that you've heard over the years that guys have used to be lucky and get a sturgeon, like baiting or decoys or whatever? What are the tricks of the trade if you want to be successful?

CW: Well, I can remember going back when the water was pretty clear, lots of years – we had years when it was real clear. Then we had years where you couldn't see deep into your decoy. We put sliced potatoes on the bottom. We put corn on the bottom, anything like that to bring up the bottom of the lake, so you could see better. Anything that went across, any kind of a fish, you would see it. Back in the year that I got my 71-pounder in 1964, the lake was so clear then that you could see pebbles on the bottom. I think there's a difference in what you use for decoys. Years ago, you could find anything in there. I went into somebody's shanty, and he had a toilet seat hanging down in there for a decoy. I can't think of it right now, all the different things that they use. It was –

DR: I've heard bowling balls.

CW: Well, yeah. They have done that too. I don't know if that really makes a difference. I always have this feeling that you have to be in the spot at the right time. When there's a sturgeon going through and they are nosy, they'll usually come up to your decoy and check it out, see what it is. I've seen that happen lots of times.

DR: Are your decoys in the shape of fish, or do you use objects?

CW: Oh, all of decoys that I ever used are the shape of fish. I have one decoy that I don't know

if anybody has one like it. My son doesn't even want to put it down in the water because it's made out of copper. It was made by (Bill Bourne?) that used to have Fine Lucky Bourne's – whatever business it was. He made that stuff. That's my son that has it right now. He won't even put it down in the hole because he's afraid he'll lose it. It is one of the only ones that I've ever seen. It's almost 30-some inches long and copper. It's really nice.

DR: Very interesting. What are the other tricks that you have heard of over the years? Like even illegal things? You probably heard everything over the years. I don't want anybody's name, but what are the tricks that you've heard?

CW: I can go back to – I think it probably was in the 1970s. A lady friend and I, we always went out together. She had an old Chevy. I think it's a [19]52 or something like that. We'd take out. We'd go out by ourselves lots of time. We've seen sturgeon. We've [inaudible] them. Both her and I, we usually sat together. But this one time, which I can tell a story now, we had a lot of snow this year, and my husband was running the plow all the time. Well, the sturgeon came through, and I threw the spear, thinking it looked legal. At that time, it was I think 40 inches. It was 2 inches too short. I had put the spear right through it. I had it practically cut in half. So, we didn't know what we should do. We just got the spear out, and here we had two pieces of fish. So, we decided we couldn't throw it back in. The warden would come. So, she had her lunch bag, and I had my lunch bag. So, she put half of it in hers, I put half in mine, and we put it behind our stove. Just hoping that Fritz would be coming with the snow plow any minute, so we could throw it on the snowplow, in the back of that. Just lo and behold, we looked, and here this one part of the sturgeon where the head was, was jumping around in that bag, which would have been pretty bad if a warden would have come in. But we got away with it all right. My husband came and got the thing on to the back of the snowmobile or the snowplow, and he took it into shore.

DR: It tasted all right?

CW: Yeah. Right. [laughter]

DR: You have any special recipes that you had over the years? Frying, smoking, whatever?

CW: Well, usually the bigger ones or the bigger part of the fish, like that one, we always had smoked. But if we got a smaller one, would stake it out, skin it. Usually, right along the skin is where the more – the stronger part is. It's like fat in there. So, we would slice it up and my husband would stake it out. One way that I found, the best thing to do with it is to soak it at least overnight in milk. Sometimes I would put just a little seasoning salt in with that milk. But that seemed to take the muddy taste out, if some of them do have a muddy taste, to try and fry them. Then I just use my regular recipe for dipping the fish into egg and breading. Sometimes I put it on the broiler, which is another good way that I found out, putting it in your broiler oven, underneath it on your broiler. Then I had a recipe that you use melted butter and Worcestershire sauce and wine, red wine. Mix that and keep basting it while it was underneath the broiler. That was another good way. In fact, that was the way I liked it the best.

DR: (William?) smoked too?

CW: Yes. The big chunks, the bigger parts, my husband always had somebody else smoke it. John Goyke smoked a lot for us. Later on, my husband did some of the smoking himself.

DR: Are these recipes that you've developed, or others have given you? How did you come upon all these things?

CW: The one with the broiler with the wine, I got that from one of my lady friends who's passed away fifteen years ago.

DR: What do you enjoy most about the sturgeon spearing?

CW: Well, you've got to have a lot of patience, if you could sit out there like I did. Some years, I sat almost the whole season when I could get away with it, any days I could go out. The excitement when you get one. I've done a lot of other things. I've shot a lot of deer in my life. But I think getting a sturgeon is more of a thrill because it's the patience you've got to have. When they come, that's it. You've got to throw the spear.

DR: Have you missed many?

CW: Oh, I've missed a few. Yes, I have. Like the story that I told about, the one when I gaffed that one. The gaff came out and was laying on top of the water, and I couldn't reach it. So, I had a leather jacket on. I got to wrap my arms around his neck and took him out on my hands and knees, out onto the ice all by myself. When I got it out there, there was guys coming from all over. But before that, nobody heard me holler. [laughter]

DR: I imagine being in the restaurant and tavern business here, you've met a lot of friends and lifelong friends. Tell me about some of the dignitaries you have met.

CW: Well, let me see. Well, going back to a lot of the doctors and lawyers and people that hunted out here on the islands, I got to know all of them because they came into the bar. I even made some of their ducks for them lots of times. One of the most interesting ones is Colonel Sanders. He was here in this bar. They had a convention going on, Kentucky Fried Chicken. One of our friends, Mike Twohig from Point Comfort, had two Kentucky Fried Chicken places in Fond Du Lac. So, he invited Colonel Sanders here. He stopped in at the bar here. I've got pictures of him with my husband and I and pictures taken at the bar here of my grandchildren, Sean and Anne, when they were little. Also, he gave me his life book, the history of his life, and he signed it – to my husband and I – and signed it Colonel Harland Sanders. That book I treasure more than anything else. I won't even let it go out of my house.

DR: That's good. Interesting. Who's your favorite storyteller about the lore of the lake regarding the sturgeon stories?

CW: Let me see. I suppose there could be quite a few of them that I can remember that used to come in and tell all the stories. Some of them that were pretty lucky in getting sturgeon, going back, well like (Jake Abraham?), Artie Sonnenberg. Well, I've got an album – two albums that

have just about everybody that got a surgeon in the years that we were here. I've got their pictures in there, going back to Ambrose Brown. His picture's in there quite a few times. Cliff Reeder, several of them that did real good.

DR: I would imagine a lot of these gentlemen and ladies are passing on now, huh?

CW: Yes. There's still a few of them, but they don't spear anymore. I don't get to see them. There's still some of them that are still around here yet that are 85 years old.

DR: Yeah. I've got the names from some of these people that you have told me about that I will be talking to shortly. In conclusion, what would you say was your most long-lasting, rememberable experience on the lake?

CW: Well, I don't know. I was out there quite a bit. I spend a lot of time on the lake, on the ice, ice fishing and summer fishing. One of the things that I'll never forget – and there's pictures in my scrapbook – we had a fishing club, five of us swimming. Every Wednesday, we would take this lady's [19]52 Chevy, and we would go out tip-up fishing. That was the fun of everything. Before the sturgeon season started, we'd do that. We'd have our little party out there and cook our food there. We had a lot of days that we did really good on the pike fishing. Then when the sturgeon season started, the ones that still wanted, would go sturgeon spearing. We'd go out together on that, too, when the weather was good enough, so we wouldn't have to depend on the men to help us. So, I've had a lot of experiences on the lake.

DR: Very interesting. Thank you very much. Transcriber, the next portion of the interview – of the recorded interview is same day, 03/13/06, and it's at Wendt's on the Lake. We're interviewing and talking to Norb and Rose Hartman. They are sturgeon spearsers. The questions will begin. As a point of information to you, Rose supposedly is the lucky spearer. So, if the conversation gets a little slanted in that direction, that's what they have already told me. To start with, they want a little bit of biographical information about all the people that are involved in this, like did the Germans do this, and the Polish do that or whatever, this kind of stuff. Tell me when you were born, how large your family was, where your parents came from, and their occupation. Just keep talking until you run out of stuff.

Rose Hartman: Where my parents were born?

DR: Just give me a history about yourself.

RH: My dad was born in Oshkosh and my mother in High Cliff. We lived on a farm here in Winnebago County, town of Black Wolf.

DR: How many children have you had?

RH: There's four children in our family. We have no children.

DR: You were farmers?

RH: Yes.

DR: Dairy farmers?

RH: Yes.

DR: What got you into sturgeon spearing?

RH: We had friends that went out fishing. So, we joined them, and it's a fun time.

DR: It's a wintertime sport for farmers once they got their chores done.

RH: Well, this was long after the farm. [laughter]

DR: Okay. Who taught you this activity?

RH: Well, (Carly Kind?) and (Bob Rifles?), friends of ours.

DR: Do you have pictures and whatnot that you can share with us?

RH: Yes. We have some pictures.

DR: Okay. If you would, we'll talk about that later. What are then some of the more interesting things that have happened to you when you're spearing?

RH: Well, the first one I got, I was with a friend. It was pretty early in the morning. I was in the friend's shack. We didn't have a shack at that time. It was pretty clear. I saw it coming. It started going out of the hole. So, I threw the spear at it. He didn't have a very long rope on it, and it kind of bounced off the wall. But we did get the fish. Of course, I missed a lot of them anyways. But the other time, my girlfriend and I, we always played cribbage while we fished. So, we had to take turns looking in the hole. Doing that, I think I got three fish, watching – playing cribbage and watching.

DR: Oh, interesting. Well, what was the biggest one? Smallest? Biggest one?

RH: The smallest one is the one I got this year, 21 pounds, 48 inches – 48.5 inches, I don't know. Yeah, 48.5. The biggest one was 94 pounds, 69 inches.

DR: That's a nice-sized fish. What do you like most about spearing?

RH: The partying.

DR: The partying? I didn't think sturgeon spearers partied.

RH: [laughter]

DR: You have any more interesting stories about your experience and your friends' experiences?

RH: Well, the time when I got the big one, I had already missed one that year. Norb decided that I needed more weight in my spear, which name is Big Silver. So, he put some weight in it. I saw one fish which was way out of the hole. I aimed at it. The spear fell right next to the fish. So, I missed that one. Then they decided we were moving the shack north. Of course, we had snow the day before, and wind. It was very rough going. We hit a bump, and our shack kind of fell apart. So, when we got where we were going to go, we cut the hole. I sat in the shack. It was quite breezy in there because the sides had popped. When Norb came back then, I decided I was going to fix the shack and shovel snow because he was already cold, which I did. I came in. I always put a sponge on the side of the shack with my spears, so it didn't rattle. Then he yelled at me about there's a fish. I had duct tape on my hands, putting it on the sponge, and I jumped and looked. Sure enough, there was a tail going through. I grabbed his spear. At the same time, we threw his spear. He said, "I think we both missed." I said, "No, I didn't." He said, "Get the fish back in there." I pulled on it, and it was quite a struggle. But in the meantime, I've got the tape on my hands. I'm pulling the rope. It's going over the end, and I got it all a mess. He put the other spear in it. So, we had two spears now in there. So, we did manage to get the fish out, but it was –

DR: It was a struggle.

RH: It was a struggle.

DR: Do you have any recipes how you prepare your fish or how you like to eat them?

RH: Just one, we like to grill it.

DR: Just on the old charcoal grill in the backyard?

RH: Yeah.

DR: Good.

RH: That seems to be the favorite.

DR: Where do you find your recipes? Or is this something you just developed?

RH: I believe somebody kind of gave us that one – that recipe. I didn't develop nothing. No.

DR: Do you have any nieces or nephews that you take along and passing the lore of the spearing on to them? Or is this just something you and your husband do to occupy your wintertime?

RH: Well, the nephew's been out there with us a few years. Two or three years ago, he saw and got his first fish.

DR: Well, that's luck. Well, Norb, tell me about your experiences.

Norb Hartman: Well, yeah. Rose got most of them in already. The first one, I know it was out of the hole, and there was a whole bunch of us in the shack of course. I guess I might have been the only one that saw it because it was off to one side. I got the spear, and everybody's looking around wondering what he threw at. I said, "I threw it at a fish." He said, "Oh, you missed it." I said, "No, I didn't." You can feel that on the spear right away. It wasn't a huge one, but it was the first one. It was pretty nice, probably 35 pounds or so. That was a nice one. I don't get too many of them. One morning, we were out. It was storming, sort of snowing. We stopped across the road. There used to be a bar over here. We stopped there for breakfast. On the way out – I was always nervous that morning, I don't know why. I said, "We've got to get out there. So, we get out there and setting down – our shack was all alone because we couldn't see nothing else and couldn't see bottom. So, it was the only clear water we saw. So, that's where we set. Rose had the door open as she was pouring herself a coffee, and I said, "Here comes one." We weren't even in the shack. It wasn't even warm in there yet, and I had him. He was, I think, around 64 pounds. There's a nice one. Well, I remember one thing that it seems hard to believe, but one year, it was just right after the – started on the \$2000 fine or whatever for fish – illegal fishing and all that. I wanted to make darn sure I got one the right size. I didn't want to pay. So, we went. Again, it was in the shallow water. We had been the day before, the Poygan, because we thought we could get something there. It was dirty in the deep water. We come back. We didn't like it there. So, we come back. I'm sitting in the shack alone, and here comes a fish in. He didn't come into the hole real good. I was waiting and waiting. All at once, he just kind of settled down on the bottom. I actually think he took a nap there. He was there for twenty minutes. I put the size up the length of him. So, I'm just watching and hoping, sooner or later – and I had the spear in my hand several times. I was going to throw it and now he is not. I'm thinking my decoy is 12 inches, and I needed four decoy lengths. I was thinking, I don't know if he is. At times I thought he was. Then after twenty minutes or so, he just rose up. He kind of went and skirted the hole. I didn't get a good shot at him. I couldn't get a shot at him because he was under the shack on the side where I was sitting and left. I thought I've got to check that decoy once. It was 15 inches. I only needed three lengths. So, I was kind of bad with.

DR: Bad decision?

NH: Yeah. But that's a hard story to believe, isn't it?

DR: No. There's a lot of stories like that out there. I'm sure of that.

NH: Was there?

DR: You don't have any tricks of the trade, so to speak, to maybe make your luck become luckier?

NH: Well, not really. We used the hubcap for years. I found it in the ditch one year, and we used that for years. We didn't use it this year. I couldn't find it. We used the decoy this year. Rose got lucky with that. So, I don't think there's any tricks to it.

DR: Just the curiosity of the fish raises up to the decoy and hope that one crosses?

NH: Yeah. The funny thing about it is I don't think I've ever had one come up to the decoy. They never come near it. Some people say they come up, and they stop. But I never did have it happen that way.

DR: Very good. I imagine you two people are going to continue the sport until you can still get out on the ice, huh?

RH: Yeah.

DR: Did you enjoy it? How do you get out there?

RH: Take the truck. Or this year, we used the snowmobiles. But one year, we walked.

NH: That's only about four years ago or something. Nobody ever fished in between the island and here. Never. We weren't going to go out that year. The ice was so bad and everything. A friend of ours over here said, "Well, I can maybe get them out with the snowmobile or whatever." I said, "Well, I'm not going to bring my shack down." He says, "Well, I've got two shacks. We'll take those out, and we'll walk out." So, we did. The first day, Rose got one right away. That's never happened in between here. Now, there's a lot of people fish there.

DR: Well, there only has to be one guy to find out where they are.

NH: Yeah.

DR: Are you part of the group that comes after the fact here and parties a little bit?

RH: Definitely.

DR: I was here a couple of times this year myself, and you could hardly move in this place.

RH: Yes. Before the addition, we used to have I think a lot more snow than we get currently, and the water would be just running. You didn't wear your boots in here. You were definitely getting wet feet than it used to be. Basically, the locals, you knew everyone. However, that's changed.

DR: What would you say in conclusion that keeps you doing this?

RH: Well, it's kind of fun in the winter. You've got to have something to do. The other thing is, we have a group we tend to fish with. We cook out there, and we eat together and party together.

DR: It's kind of a camaraderie you've developed.

RH: Right. We're like the Old West, put the shacks in a circle, so we can just walk next door.
[laughter]

DR: You cook out here too then? Do you cook out on the lake?

RH: Sure. We have a couple of the shacks. Two of them have apartment-size gas ranges in. So, we have everything we need.

DR: Are you the group that eats your deer out here? The steaks? The deer steaks?

RH: No.

DR: I see some groups out here that were cooking up their deer meat.

RH: That wouldn't be us. [laughter]

NH: We never get no deer.

DR: Well, very good. I appreciate your interest and your time helping us put this book together. I hope to see you out on the ice.

RH: Very good. It was nice talking to you.

DR: Thank you very much.

[end of transcript]