

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

Linda Wendt Oral History

Date of Interview: April 3, 2006

Location: Van Dyne, Wisconsin

Length of Interview: 00:19:15

Interviewer: DR – Dick Ristow

Transcriber: NCC

Dick Ristow: April 3rd, 2006. We're talking to Linda Wendt in Wendt's on the Lake. Linda is the owner of Wendt's on the Lake. So, we'll start with her history as a sturgeon spearer and then going into the business. So, Linda, tell me about your experiences with sturgeon spearing. How do you get started in it? How many have you speared? Just keep telling me about your history about that.

Linda Wendt: Okay. I believe it was in 1966. It was the first time that I really heard of sturgeon – sturgeon spearing. I was sixteen and, at that time, dating my boyfriend, Mike Wendt. He took me out on Lake Winnebago, and he said, "This is really a cool sport". So, I went out there and began my history with the sturgeon, sturgeon spearing, and all what that entails. It was – well, from the beginning, I mean, it's a sport that you can't describe. You have to do it. You have to really go out there and see what's down there. But anyway, it was several years, I would say, before I actually saw one in the hole there, and that was exciting. I mean, you wait, and you wait, and you wait and all. Then all of a sudden, here comes a sturgeon. I was there many times to see people spear the sturgeon. Actually, I've never speared one myself. I've been there when many have been speared and watched and helped them get them out of the hole and that type of thing. When my children were sitting with us and that it was always more exciting for me to see them do it. Actually, for anyone, I just liked watching them, their enthusiasm, the excitement of the other people. That fish comes through, and here they go. Everybody's thinking, oh, what – who should grab the spear? Who should throw first? What should we do here? But anyway, so I've seen many sturgeon speared and pulled out of the ice – many sturgeons on the ice. Anyway, then of course, when each one of my children got their first sturgeon, that was really exciting.

DR: Were you with the kids when they speared there?

LW: No. I wasn't with either one of them with their first sturgeon, just after the excitement when they bring it in here and all the pictures and the stories of how they got them. But when they were at that point – when I was sixteen, of course, they weren't even born. But once we had the children, they got to the age where they – well, actually we took them out there when they were very little, I'd say a couple of years old. They just developed that enthusiasm, that heartfelt desire to do this.

DR: You're bringing up an (Eskimo?) baby, huh?

LW: Right. So, anyway, they – it's in both their blood. It's just there. They're excited about it and can't wait to go out there. So, anyway, they – that's the fun of it for me, watching the rest of the people, listening to all their stories, and what have you and seeing them hang out here, from the tiny, tiny one to the huge sturgeon. Like I said, all the camaraderie in here and listening to the people with their excitement –

DR: Your daughter, Ann, says they used to drag them right in the bar here.

LW: Right. Years ago, I'd say, well, in the first – well, in the early years when Wendt's – before we had the additions here, yes, they would bring them right in here and flop them on the floor with all their excitement and started to – telling their stories.

DR: That would make the floor kind of slippery.

LW: Yes, just a little bit. Yes. That was before. We're into a lot of the food in that. So, once that began, that was the end of bringing sturgeon on the floor. So – but it was fun.

DR: I imagine you met a lot of nice people over the years.

LW: Many, yes. Lots of nice people, and they've – in nineteen – well, when I first started coming here in 1966, those people, those same people, a lot of those people are still coming. I mean, each year, they get their license and come in here and meet and then go with their group out there. If they get a fish, of course, they're excited. If they don't, it's still fun. There's still – it's still – I think it's a sport that a lot of people can enjoy. It's not just the individual, actually, doing the spearing. I think everybody can get into it. I mean, it's an exciting sport that everyone that's watching enjoys.

DR: Shawn still gets excited telling about his 80- or 65- pounder when – the first one he speared when he was 15 years old –

LW: Right, yes.

DR: – 12 years old.

LW: Yes. I think it's that first one that you never forget.

DR: Surprisingly, Ann says she has speared six of them.

LW: Yes. Let's see, would it be six? I guess so.. [laughter] Yes. She's – well, she doesn't let the guys get ahead of her.

DR: [inaudible]

LW: Oh, for sure. Yes, for sure.

DR: Do you eat the fish too?

LW: Yes.

DR: What's your favorite?

LW: I would say, I like smoked fish, but I also like it boiled like lobster. I like it like that. Actually, it's good anyway, but I'd say my favorite probably is smoked.

DR: Do you prepare them special?

LS: Actually, well, I baked them already, and I pan-fried them. I wouldn't say there's a special recipe. I mean, I think everybody somewhat makes them – makes it alike, but the boiling is very good. I mean, I like it that way. It's very good.

DR: Do you still go out on the lake?

LW: [affirmative] I haven't the last couple of years because of the conditions. Also, well, I guess even more so than that, when it's just the weekends, I'm in here working. So, I let the kids go out. I let everybody else go out. My time was always like a Monday or a Tuesday. This year, I just didn't feel that I wanted to be out there this year. But in previous years I've gone out there. I get a tag every year. Like I said, I would just sit on a Monday or a Tuesday. Many years ago, I want to say maybe – well, maybe fifteen to twenty years ago, I used to have a ladies' event out there. Sometimes, we combined it with sturgeon spearing and sometimes, just the (regular tip of?) fishing and that. But anyway, we'd go out there and – in style. Everyone had to wear a fur coat, and we had the Margaritas, and we had the tip of poles outside and what have you. Al Sampson used to come and visit us and take pictures and what have you and put it on there. But anyway, we had a really good time. Those that had the spearing license, they sat in the shanties and waited for the sturgeon to come through. But that was always a good time. It was maybe fifteen ladies that went out there and did that. But like I said, now that I have the business by myself, I'm in here most of the time taking care of the people that are coming in. They tell me the stories. But it's been good.

DR: Do you have any interesting stories that you can recollect? A favorite story?

LW: Let's see. Well, this is kind of fun. Normally, everyone has thought of that you need to go way out on the lake to get this fish, what have you, that it's not going to be close in here. So, down South or whichever direction they go or straight out, it's always a mile – couple miles out for sure. Well, a couple of years ago, this couple that's been coming in here since I've been – [19]66 or before, the woman said – well, the wife said, "I'm just not going to go way out there". The ice wasn't the best that year. She said, "I'm not going to go out. I'm just not going to go out". She said, "I'm going to go as far as I can walk". So, they put the shanty right by the trees, right? Those right here just past my trees, maybe 20 feet out there, plumped the shanty there, drilled the hole, what have you. She sat there and within maybe an hour, she got – a sturgeon came through.

DR: (They can see in the water?)

LW: Yes. I mean, it was just right out here, off of the shore. So, she came in, and everybody's like, "Oh my God, this can't be possible". She was just ecstatic and whatever. She said, "See." It's just, it doesn't matter where you go. If they're there, they're there. I mean, she was just elated to think. I mean, it was – I'm sure in her mind, she didn't obviously expect she'd ever get a fish, but she wanted to go out there without going miles out. So, she told that story. Everybody that came in, they're like, "I can't believe it. I can't believe it." She still tells the story.

DR: Some people – my wife is a little bit antsy about getting on the lake when it's cracking.

LW: Oh, yes.

DR: The thunder cracks. It's scary.

LW: It is. it's scary when you hear that sound. But the lake does that. It shifts, and you've got to not think about it, you know?

DR: What has this meant to your business?

LW: Phenomenal. Well, actually, even before I was here, the month of February has been probably the best month of the year, normal conditions. Before the caps were put on the sturgeon, when it was the 16 days, it was – February is always the biggest month in the twelve months due to the sturgeon spearing. The last maybe what, four or five years, that hasn't been the case. This year was very good because it was the full season again. But it's – well, the bar, it's ten deep in here every day. When it's – when the conditions are good, and everybody can get out on the lake. So, it's wonderful.

DR: That's good. From 1 to 100, what percent of the – y your business would be attributed to sturgeon spearing in the course of the year?

LW: You mean other than February?

DR: Yes.

LW: Well, I think, basically, they get their licenses, and I have to have them by October 31st. So, there's a period during that time when they're buying their licenses.

DR: You also sell licenses here?

LW: Oh, yes. So, at that point – you do have onlookers throughout the year. We do have the fish on the wall – the sturgeon on the wall. So, people are always questioning about that. What is that? People that aren't familiar with Lake Winnebago. So, it's definitely a good talking point when they see that sturgeon up there.

DR: I know when we come off the lake, we're always looking at your (blackboard?), so to speak, where you have this – the sturgeon –

LW: Oh, right. That's –

DR: Shawn took it down now.

LS: Right. We take it down for the summer. But yes, definitely, it's that first weekend, especially when sturgeon Spring opens, lots of onlookers, I mean, lots and lots. They drive through and – or they call and say, "Are there any sturgeon hanging? Can we come and look at it?" So, it's gotten so big, and people from all over call and ask about it.

DR: From the pictures that Shawn's been showing me, there's a lot of ladies, local girls right here, your neighbors that have been – a lot of camaraderie developed just because of the spearing.

LW: Exactly. Right. Lots and lots more ladies are taking up spearing. Like I said before, I

think that's a sport that a lot of people are getting more and more into and especially the ladies.

DR: Shawn seemed to think they're more patient than men.

LW: [laughter] I don't know about that. Maybe, possibly, I'm not sure. I guess, Shawn, that's a theory. [laughter] I would think about that.

DR: I understand that you were the Restaurant Lady of the Year for the state of Wisconsin this year.

LW: Yes. The Restaurateur of the Year. Yes.

DR: That's quite an honor.

LW: It is, yes. I was very excited about that.

DR: How many restaurants were involved in that?

LW: Over four thousand.

DR: Wow. What do you attribute your fame to?

LW: Good food and good staff, good hospitality.

DR: How many people you employ here?

LW: About forty.

DR: Forty people.

LW: So, yes. It was very, very nice, very unexpected.

DR: What's the best menu item?

LW: The Perch.

DR: The Perch.

LW: I mean, that's what we – predominantly, we sell the most, the Perch.

DR: Friday night special?

LW: Well, we have Perch every day. But Friday is, by far, our busiest night, Friday night, due to the perch. Well, it's just the Wisconsin tradition, I think, fish on Friday night. But also, we do sell a lot of barbecued ribs and deep-fried lobster and prime rib. I'd say those four are our main items – signature items. We've won a lot of awards for those four items. So, yes. It's very –

DR: So, what are you going to do next year for an encore?

LW: [laughter] I don't know. I haven't thought that far yet. I've just got a relish this year. So, yes. It's very exciting when your peers think that highly of you.

DR: Where did this take place?

LW: The actual award was given to me in Milwaukee, an awards banquet, which they have every year. So, it was great.

DR: Were you aware of this?

LW: No. They do not tell you. It's a total secret. So, yes, I was in shock, needless to say. I still am. I was the first woman. That's what the shocker was. Because you never – I would have never expected that they'd give it to a woman. So, I'm very happy.

DR: Women are the best cooks.

LW: That's what they say. [laughter]

DR: What has this meant to you, the little sturgeon thing in your business? I mean, personally, what do you think you've achieved by this?

LW: What have I achieved personally? I don't know. I think, I have all the – I think getting – well, that's not personal. I was going to say all the people that I've met with that are tremendous. But personally, I think my business has grown because of this particular sport. Then because of that, because the business growing, I've met so many wonderful people through the years and been able to share their excitement with them. I think it's – and I'm also on this Sturgeon for Tomorrow board director on there. I think I've learned a lot through being on that board and learned so much about the sturgeon, the history of the sturgeon, and the need to keep Winnebago full of sturgeon for our future generations. So, all around, I think it's good for everybody.

DR: So, I suppose you pray for a 16 day-season?

LW: Oh, yes, every year. I start the day it closes, praying for the next year. So, definitely.

DR: Good. I guess that's a dumb question I was going to ask you, who are you going to pass this on to? But that wouldn't be pertaining very much. Who are you going to give the restaurant to? [laughter] Shawn has been with you since – he's been telling me, been stocking shelves here.

LW: Right. They both – I mean, we used to live here in the back. So, I think Sean was – I don't know. I think he was six maybe, when we moved here and –

DR: So, there's you, Shawn, and Ann keeping the tradition going.

LW: Right. Definitely. Because they both enjoy it, it'll just keep on. I know their children will

because they already take them out there at two, three, four, and five.

DR: Do you fish too?

LW: Yes. I'm not as good as they are, but yes. And then winter and summer too, when I can get out there. So, yes. So, it really keeps us busy.

DR: Well, very good. Thank you very much.

LW: Sure. Thank you.

[end of transcript]