

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

Shawn Wendt Oral History

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Interviewer: DR – Dick Ristow

Transcriber: NCC

Dick Ristow: Today, April 3rd, 2006, we're talking to Shawn Wendt at Wendt's on the Lake. He's got a lot of stories to tell us. We'll start with give us a background of your family, Shawn. I already talked to your mom and dad. But go ahead and do it again, and we'll take it from there.

Shawn Wendt: Well, I'm the son of Mike and Linda Wendt. I was basically born and raised right here in in the restaurant here at Wendt's on the Lake. Fritz and Cynth are my grandma and grandpa. Fritz Wendt and Cynth Wendt are my grandma and grandpa, and they started the place here back in 1962.

DR: How long have you worked here then?

SW: I've worked here – well, I started doing the bottle shoot and filling coolers when I was about six, seven years old.

DR: You've been in the tavern and restaurant business a long time.

SW: Yes, I have.

DR: You've got the reputation of putting a lot of effort into the sturgeon spearing. Tell me about how you got into it, how it grew up to where it is right now.

SW: Well, it started, like I said, doing stuff around here and helping my parents out, doing whatever they needed me to do in the restaurant here. Then my Uncle Doug used to take me fishing and everything. He's the one who actually got me out there sturgeon spearing when I turned 14. My grandpa, I always rode along with him when he set up his renters and stuff. I always was in the truck with him, and my parents would let me go out there with him and travel around. So, I got to see a lot from the get-go.

DR: Did that get you into the sturgeon rental shack business then?

SW: Yes. Eventually, I did take over the rental. But like I said, when I went with my grandpa, I rode around with him. Before I was legal to spear, when I was 13 years old, 1982 or 1980 – yes, [19]82 it was, I'd seen three fish speared that year, just going around with my grandpa. I'd seen my grandpa spear his that year. I'd also seen a renter. We walked into shanty, and grandpa was explaining how – you know, the renter asked how to throw the spear, and Grandpa said, "Put it crossways over the fish. Then you just give it a kind of little shove when they come into the hole. If they're coming at you, you obviously don't want to move, you know, and until the eyes – you know, they're always looking up at you." He was explaining that to him. Also, just like that, one came into the hole. Grandpa said, "Okay. Now, you've got to take the spear and put it crossways over the fish." I was watching right over – you know, (sinking?) through between their legs. The guy threw it and got one, you know. So, like I said – so, the renter, he speared that fish. That was the second one I'd seen speared. Then Grandpa and I, we got back in the truck. Then we went to – my cousin was coming out. We moved the shanty. We sawed it in and helped him get it moved over the hole. We banked it up. My cousin, she went in the shanty, and she – I walked in there with her. The door was still open. We didn't have the chairs in yet, and we were finishing banking yet. She went [deep breath], like that. I heard her go. My

grandpa and I both ran in there. She had the spear in her hand, and a fish came right on her feet. Like I said, I was sticking my head through there again. She was just ready to spear. My grandpa grabbed the spear out of her hand, and he threw it himself and got it. So, that was like the third fish I'd seen that year before I was even legal to spear. So, that was pretty exciting. I was hooked for life then.

DR: So, when did you sit in the shack by yourself? How old were you when you started that?

SW: Well, 14 years old was when you could start spearing. I sat – those were the days when you sat all day long from dark to dark. My grandpa would drop me off at a shanty in the morning before he set up his renters. I'd sit there all day by myself, looking down. That year was very dirty, the first year I could spear, I mean – but good thing I'd seen three fish speared the year before. That helped me sit there longer and wait them out, you know. But I never did spear a fish the first year. I wasn't able to spear. Because the water, you can only see, like 3 feet below the ice that year.

DR: What was it like going on in years after that, when you got the big one?

SW: Well, the next year, when I was 15 years old, is – I was – went to church on that Sunday morning, I believe, was opening weekend. I went to church, and my Uncle Doug had set up a shanty for me. As soon as I got home from church – I was only 15 years old, but I would learn to drive a truck out on the ice. So, I took off in the truck and went out to the shanty. Uncle Doug had the shanty all ready for me. I sat in there, and I wasn't in the shanty 10 minutes, 15 minutes, right out of church, and this 58-pounder came right off the corner, upper left-hand side, and came through. I waited until he got under the spear and speared him. It was –

DR: Just like grandpa told you.

SW: Yes, exactly, just like he said. I was so excited. You know, I wasn't old enough to drive, but I was so excited that I threw the fish in the back of the truck and was coming in to register the. DNR pulled me over, and they wanted to check my license and check everything. Here I wasn't even old enough to drive. I was more scared about that than the fish or anything, because I wasn't legal to drive. I thought they're going to get me for that. But it ended up they just checked me and everything. I drove the rest of the way and registered it.

DR: Did you have to tag them back then?

SW: Yes. I believe it was the metal tags yet.

DR: Metal tag?

SW: Yes.

DR: Do you have any of the little metal tags?

SW: I might have some laying around in the drawers or something.

DR: [inaudible]

SW: I'm sure some – we could find some from some gentlemen around.

DR: You told me earlier that you had a lot of stories with your renters, shack renters.

SW: Yes. I have one story that sticks in my mind. I had a bunch of guys from Illinois come out. I took them out to the shack and set them all up and everything. I was – you know, after the night, there's always ice skims over the hole, obviously, you know. I always – when I open the door, I always grab the tank out and walk around the shanty and hook up the tank first. Then I come back in and light the stove. Well, I was going around the shanty. I was hooking up the tank. All of a sudden, I heard splashing and yelling and screaming. I went running around the shanty. Here's a guy in the hole. He was just climbing out of the hole. He thought he could stand on that little skimmed ice that was sitting in there. He's – I had opened the holes already. He stood on that ice and fell right in and like, oh, geez, yes, you can't stand on that, you know. That just froze over from last night, you know. They had some snowmobiles and stuff that day. So, while I went – set up the rest of my renters, and I came back and checked on them. Because I always check on the renters during the day. I came back to check on them. I walk in the shanty, open the door, "Guys, everything all right?" I open the shanty, and they had two stringers across the shanty. There were clothes hanging all over the place, drying. I said, "What happened?" I said, "Did somebody else fall in?" He said, "Yes. One of the guys was – he was coming back in the door. He tripped, and he went headfirst, right into the hole." So, I had two guys soaking wet. So, they had clothes hanging across. They had lines hung up and with clothes hanging all over the place, drying. I'm sitting there. "Well," I said, "where's your other buddy with the snowmobile?" They said, "We don't know where he is." He said – they said, "He took off this morning when we first got here, and we haven't seen him since." I'm like, holy cow, you know. So, I went back checking on, you know, the other renters and stuff. It came to the end of the day. I went back to the shanty. I'm like, "Guys, you ready to go in?" I noticed that the guy still wasn't back, that had the snowmobile. I'm like, "The guy still didn't come back, your buddy?" They go, "No. We don't know where he is. He never came back, you know." So, we went – we brought them in and everything. All of a sudden, we got a call from the Sheriff's Department. Here, this guy was way up a high cliff on the other end of the lake. He was lost way up there. The Sheriff's Department – I said, "Yes, his buddies are here and everything." They brought him all the way around the lake in the cop car. So, that was quite the crew that day with them renters.

DR: Over the years, I've heard a lot of stories about guys when there were cloudy water, to coax the sturgeon in, they would throw things in the hole. Do you ever hear stuff like that over the bar, bar talk, or stuff like that?

SW: Oh, yes. There are guys that do chum. Like I said, my grandpa, years ago, he always – we always had dead minnows. We used to sell minnows out of the place here. The dead ones, we'd always save and put in pails. We used to take them out, Grandpa did. Before we get ready, you know, before the season would start, we'd know areas that we usually fish. We'd dump minnows, the dead ones, down the hole, you know, and chum. Hopefully, the sturgeon would be

there when the season came around.

DR: Did it work?

SW: Well, I believe so. We got sturgeon. Also, I know some guys, my friends, they used to take big metal, like a decoy, and hang it from the bottom of his regular decoy. He used to put dog food in there. He swears by that, that that works, hanging dog food down in the hole below his regular decoy. He'd have a pipe in there with dog food stuffed in it.

DR: I've heard things like potatoes. But mostly, that was for reflection, right?

SW: That was for – so you could see the bottom. You use the sliced off potatoes, and you can see the bottom when it was clear.

DR: Do you have a favorite type of decoy?

SW: Basically – I mean, everybody talks about their favorite decoy. I move around from shanty to shanty. I never really sit in the same shanty, because I have so many of them. I have a different decoy in every shanty. I can't find one that's really a hot one. I mean, I've speared, you know, enough fish that I think whatever you've got down there, they're so curious, they're going to come to check out.

DR: It's just the attractant.

SW: Right.

DR: What's a procedure like, your (effort?) at the start of a day or start of putting in shanties? What kind of work do you go through to get that established?

SW: First of all, it takes a couple of months to get everybody lined up. You know, you're calling them and back and forth on the phone, you know, talking and trying to get everybody lined up before the season even gets here, booking everybody. Then once it does get here, I have them here at like, 5:15 a.m. I have everybody meet here at the restaurant. We check everybody in. Once we get everybody in, I tell them which vehicle I've got and follow me out. They're usually a pretty good line, following me all the way out to the shanties and usually have my dad helping me out. We usually go out ahead of time. Before the guys even get here, we'll go out like 2:00 a.m., 3:00 a.m. and get the heaters on and get the ice skimmed off the holes and get the heaters turned on and get them – you know, so, when we take them out there, all they've got to do is walk in the shanty. It's nice and heated, and it's ready to roll, you know. Skimmed ice is all off the holes. All they've got to do is put their decoys down, and they're ready to spear.

DR: How many shanties do you put out the average year?

SW: This year, I had seventeen shanties that I rented out, total, that between my cousins and I and, we had seventeen that we rented – my uncle.

DR: How much do you get a day for a shanty, on the average?

SW: For a single-hole shanty, it's \$100 a day. For a double hole, it's \$200 a day.

DR: Double hole, that means you get an extra big shanty with a hole on each end?

SW: Yes. My double-holers are like 7 by 14, and they have a hole on each end. Then I have a couple of them that are bigger, 7 by 16 and 7 by 18. A couple of them are – the holes run along the whole length of the shanty.

DR: You supply the heat and the spear?

SW: Everything's included. All they've got to bring is their food and drink. Everything's in there.

DR: How many years have you been doing that?

SW: Well, I kind of got into it after Grandpa got out of it, and my Uncle Doug had taken it over more so from Grandpa. I just kind of added some shanties in there. Uncle Doug used to take care of the reservations and stuff. Since the short season, when it dropped down to – with the quota and everything and the short season, a lot of the guys got out of the renting. I stayed in it, one of the few that do rent shanties now, because of the shortness of the season. A lot of guys don't want to deal with it because they want to go and spear themselves, you know. I feel that I rather see people get fish. I like – you know, I like to see more – other people get fish before myself.

DR: Do you ever have any rescue efforts of guys dropping in?

SW: Every year, we have some type of challenge. Every year is different. We thought there was going to be a lot this year, but it was really nice. Everybody used their head this year. But there was years back – there was like two years in a row in the [19]90s that I pulled out twenty-six vehicles one year and like twenty-eight vehicles another year. We have – the West Shore Fishing Club has boom trucks that we go out there with if it's in shallow water. If it's over my head, I won't go in. But I do have a dry suit that I put on, and I get in the water and hook up the vehicles and that, if I have to. But yes, two years in a row there, it was pretty bad. [inaudible] by the islands and that, their vehicles dropping through and that. We try to mark it the best we can. We usually lay down trees when it's a bad spot. If the trees are standing up, it's all right. We mark out roads, West Shore Fishing Club, 3 miles straight out of Wendt's here. Then we mark out the road 3 miles northeast of Wendt's. We mark two roads. Then we put bridges across the cracks wherever they're needed and try to help the fishermen out.

DR: It's a lot of work to just to prepare for, if it's only going to be a three-day season.

SW: It's a lot of work, yes.

DR: What's the most exciting thing you think you can remember over the years?

SW: Most exciting experience. Well, like I said, every year is different. It seems like – I mean, I just look forward to sturgeon spearing, and a lot of guys do. That's why everybody gets so pumped up that, you know? I mean, I don't care if it's your first sturgeon or your last sturgeon. Your spear – every fish you spear is just like the first one. To think of one big experience, gosh, I would say one of the really coolest things that I ever did was catch a sturgeon on hook and line, through the ice, when the ice – when you couldn't see very good. There was a year back – I'm sure you can remember that – you couldn't see very good, and they were catching a lot of them on hook and line. I mean, I fought a 45-inch fish that I fought for over an hour and a half on like 6-pound (tests?). I thought that was really fun, catching them on hook and line.

DR: Do you setline too?

SW: I used to, years ago, with Grandpa. I used to setline for catfish. Him and I used to be partners and set setline, go out every day, and check them. But we never did get a sturgeon on it. It was always catfish or walleyes we had on it, you know, and Bullheads, you know, and stuff like that, a few perch here and there. But we never did get a sturgeon that I can remember – carp.

DR: Your experience pretty much has been around the islands and then the reefs around the islands here?

SW: Sure. Well, we try to follow the sturgeon too. I move my shanties wherever it's hot, you know. I try to get out on my own and find a hot spot. Then I'll move my shanties once I find something. I'll go out by myself and look for a new area.

DR: What do you mean a hot spot?

SW: Well, I look for, first of all, the ice conditions, if – wherever the ice conditions are good. Once I find that, then I go and look for clear water. I'd rather sit where there's clear water than sit in dirty water. So, I try to find the clearest water. Then we set up there. Actually, you know, past experiences with areas, if there's good, you know, good areas from other years, I try to go to them spots first, if it's clear there. But otherwise, I try to find clear water. Once we establish that, then we set up. Then we go from there, if we get sturgeon there. Otherwise, we go find another spot and look for another clear spot.

DR: So, you really don't have a honey hole.

SW: No. I mean, I have several of them from the past that I'll go check out first, you know. But if those aren't (opting?) then I'll go to another spot and check that out.

DR: Do you prefer the mud or the rock or stone?

SW: Well, I would prefer the mud because that's where the red worms are. I like to get in there if it's clear. But if it's not clear out there, then I'll go into the rocks, wherever I can clear – where there's clear water. The sturgeon, they're eventually going to swim across it.

DR: So, you've had the best luck in the mud where the redworms would be.

SW: Yes.

DR: Who do you think is the best beer you've met over your spearing experiences?

SW: The best spearer, Jeez.

DR: Don't tell me your grandpa.

SW: [laughter] Well, a lot of the – I mean, it's surprising how they're – the lady luck, my grandma and – has done in the past, and Rose Hartman. She – you've talked to her before – she is just very lucky, you know, as far as luck's concerned, and Patty Wagner and other women. It's surprising how the women are very lucky. My sister, Ann Wendt, she's been lucky through the years. She's telling you stories too, you know, where she's speared them.

DR: You think they're more patient than men?

SW: Very well could be. We're on the go all the time. We've got to go find another spot. So, we set the women in the shanty. My wife has speared several of them too, you know. I set her up and leave her by herself. I go try to find another spot. So, I think that's why the women are so lucky. You know, they're sitting, we're not.

DR: Do you have any special gear that you wear or have good luck stuff that you go through, a ritual or some sort or habits?

SW: No, I really don't have nothing like that today that I do. I don't have no lucky clothing, I don't think. I mean, I always put on something that says, Wendt's, Wendt's sweatshirt, or Wendt's hats, you know. Advertising, right? I've always got that on. So, I feel that's lucky, I guess.

DR: Do you have a special way you prepare your fish?

SW: Well, I like fish – the sturgeon, anyway, cooked on the grill, deep fried, pan fried, smoked. I mean, anyway you do sturgeon, if you cook it the right way, it's good anyway. I mean, on the grill, in butter, and seasoning and, you know, in a tin foil, I mean, that works really good. Deep frying it. We do it in our bread [inaudible], I mean, any way. Smoked is very good too. I don't – the way I cook it, I don't have a problem with it. I don't think it's any different taste than when they're feeding on the red worms. But a lot of guys said that they taste a lot of fish here when they're feeding on the shad, when they're full of shad. They're more oily. Yes. That's what people have said.

DR: So, you don't really have a special recipe.

SW: No.

DR: To marinate them in something.

SW: Well, I do have a way that we do prepare it before we cook it is we put it in eggs and milk and let the pieces soak in there overnight. That seems to bring out some of the fishy taste, if there is some in there, before you cook it.

DR: I imagine you've met a lot of people over the years, characters and celebrities, that come into your restaurant here.

SW: Yes, there's been a few. Al Sampson, I don't know if you remember him. He used to come out here all the time. In fact, I have a walleye hanging on the wall there that I won third place in the Al Sampson fishing contest in the winter. He was a good friend of ours. He always came out and did interviews out here. Also, James Drury was out here, the actor. Colonel Sanders was out here. My sister and I, when we were little, we got pictures taken with him. He came to the bar here a couple of times. Other than that, trying to think who else might have been out here. Maybe my mom can think of somebody else too.

DR: When you think about the business, as a businessman, if you have a three-day season versus the one you had this year, which was 16 days, how does that affect you, financially?

SW: Well, you know, you can't – the business doesn't rely on sturgeon sparing, you know, because it is only one time of the year, especially with the seasons have been going with the quota now and ending in one day, two days. You know, you definitely can't rely on that. We have, you know – throughout the whole year, we have other things going on and stuff, (EEA?) and stuff like that. But I tell you, when you have a 16-day season, it sure is a nice bonus. It's a very nice bonus, helps pay off other bills, you know, different bills.

DR: You're involved in other activities with Sturgeon for Tomorrow?

SW: Yes. We have our – I belong to the Southwest Chapter. I believe I've been treasurer now for 13 or 14 years now, been treasurer. I was on the committee. I joined before I became treasurer a couple of years before that. We run the Southwest Chapter out of Fond du Lac at the Holiday Inn. We have it every year, always the second Saturday in January.

DR: Your headquarters is here for that chapter?

SW: Well, yes. We have our meetings here and stuff before the dinner and stuff. Yes, it's based out of Wendt's.

DR: Are you passing your techniques on to your sons and nephews?

SW: I hope so. Hopefully, someday, they can see and have as much fun as I am in doing it. I look forward to it every year. Like I said, my son is going to be three now in a couple of days here, and I just had another little one. So, hopefully, someday, they'll be able to get in here and then help people out, as much as, you know, I like helping them out.

DR: Are you going to make sure they have a spear in their hand by the time they're 10 or 11?

SW: Oh, yes. The first one that we had, he was out there when he was 10 months old, spearing. I showed you a picture before of him with the sturgeon. He was out there. I had him out there this year again. He was in a shanty a couple of times. Took him out with the snowmobile and got in a shanty. He's looking down the hole. He thinks it's pretty cool seeing the shad come swimming through in that. So, I'm sure he's hooked already.

DR: Is there anything you want to [inaudible]?

SW: That should be it.

DR: Well, what kind of a menu do you have here at Wendt's?

SW: A very good menu [laughter]. We've got all kinds of favorites that people like. We have our, you know, barbecue ribs, and that we're famous for. Our perch, obviously, we're famous for. We have deep-fried lobster. I mean, prime rib on Saturday nights. We have a variety of things, sandwiches and soups, homemade soups. So, we need people to come out and try it if they haven't already.

DR: Perched fish is still a specialty, Friday nights?

SW: Friday night fish. We do serve it seven days a week in the summer. We're open seven days. We have the perch every day of the week.

DR: Very good. Thank you very much.

SW: Thank you.

[end of transcript]