

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

Dick Ristow: She is Sean's younger sister. She also works at Wendt's on the Lake. So, Ann, tell me how you've been related to the sturgeon history on Lake Winnebago and your efforts.

Ann Marie Wendt Ziemer: I remember starting out as a small girl going out with my grandparents and my dad and my mom. I remember we'd be on snowmobiles, and my brother and I would be on a trailer on the back being pulled over the crack. One day, I remember [inaudible] we were taking minnows out with us. Dad jumped a crack, and the minnow bucket flew all over. The minnows [laughter] flew all over the lake. Sean and I had a good time with that. But it was always really something to be proud of, I think. I remember growing up as a kid, all the parents would come in, all their kids would come in my age, and watch all the parents get together and drag their sturgeons into the restaurant back then when it was okay to do so. Then as I started –

DR: You mean you were dragging them slimy things right into the restaurant?

AMWZ: They would. I remember. A couple of them, I even saw right up on the bar [laughter]. I don't think my mom would allow that anymore.

DR: No, I don't think so.

AMWZ: [laughter] Then I watched quite a few speared as I grew up. Then I got some of my girlfriends into it. We'd all go out there and sit once we were of age and just laugh and have a good time. I've gotten six so far in my life. Everyone is more exciting than the last one, even now. Now, with my own kids, now I want them to be out there with me and watch. Now, I understand what a big deal it was for my dad to take us out there. I remember my first, when I got, I was sitting by myself. So, I –

DR: How old were you then?

AMWZ: I was 14, and Sean was not too far from me, sitting in a different shanty. Normally, they didn't let me sit alone, but it just happened that somebody – I was sitting with my dad and he moved on – or no. I was sitting with my uncle, and he moved on. I just was by myself for a little while, and one came through. I speared it. Have you ever speared a sturgeon? You know how at first you don't know if you have it or not? So, I dragged the rope up a little bit. Sure enough, it was on. So, I run out the shanty door. I ran to Sean, and it was glare ice at the time. I remember I just slid right past his shanty yelling, "Sean." [laughter] He came running out. We had the whole crew out there yelling and screaming. It was neat. But I think that the neatest one was when I got – a couple of years later, I pulled it in all by myself. That was my big thing. I wanted to just do it on my own [laughter].

DR: Speared it, gaffed it?

AMWZ: [laughter] Yes, everything. I didn't want any help. That was –

DR: Little excited?

AMWZ: Yes. Oh, my goodness, yes, shaking. Everybody says, "How can you sit there? It's like watching a blank TV." I'm sure you've heard that. It is boring or whatever. But yet, boy, when you get it, it's worth it. It's your heart, everything. It is worth it.

DR: It's a thrill.

AMWZ: It is. It's neat.

DR: What's the biggest one you speared?

AMWZ: The biggest one was 62 pounds, 58 inches.

DR: Oh, that's a nice size.

AMWZ: I didn't bring that one in by myself, but, yes. Yes, it was neat.

DR: You still spear with the kids now?

AMWZ: Yes. My oldest son is 4. Two years ago, he was out there and – he'll be 5 shortly. So, he was maybe a little older, maybe almost 3. He was out there with my brother-in-law, and he helped him pull it in and pull up the ropes with him. Then this last year, we had him out there. I was hoping that I'd get one with him sitting there. It didn't work out. But that's okay. It's all part of it. He's got to learn. He's got to wait too [laughter].

DR: Do you have a favorite decoy?

AMWZ: My husband and I married – my husband's a huge sturgeon spearer, been doing it before we got married, before we met. He has a rattle trap. Have you heard of a rattle trap?

DR: No. That's a new one.

AMWZ: That's a new one. Well, it's his own little invention. It's actually like a Rapala or whatever. It makes a lot of noise. He's got it in like a little box. When you pull up the rope, it shakes, and you hear it shake. This year, when my husband missed one, my 5-year-old son was sitting in there with him – Wyatt. Wyatt had just pulled that rattle trap up, and a sturgeon swam right in towards it. So, Wyatt really feels that's the key now, is a rattle trap. But my husband missed it [laughter].

DR: He missed it. A big one?

AMWZ: He missed it. No, he said it wasn't real big, but he ended up with nothing. So, real big would've been better than nothing.

DR: You also work here at the restaurant?

AMWZ: Yes, I do. Yes. It's my full-time job. I have three children now. So, I cut down my

hours quite a bit for now. It's kind of funny because this year, I didn't know if I'd make it out spearing or not with – I have a baby now too. She's eight months old. So, it's just a lot of – it's hard to find somebody to come watch your kids at 6:00 a.m., so you can go spearing. I thought, "Oh, do I, or do I not want to?" I thought, "Oh, yes, I'll go." So, one day, I went, and I sat for three hours. It was the best three hours I've had in [laughter] three years. It was quiet and relaxing and [laughter] –

DR: Who are the girls that you spear with? Old friends of yours?

AMWZ: Yes, Pam Patt. She's now married. She's a Breister, but she's a Patt girl. Her and I sat quite a few years together and had good times. A couple of times, a reporter came in and took pictures of us, younger years, sitting together and spearing. She's never actually gotten one though. I think she talks too much.

[laughter]

DR: Well, you've got to keep your nose in the hole, so to speak.

AMWZ: [laughter] Yes. Yes. This is true.

DR: So, you're going to continue passing this experience on to your son and your daughter?

AMWZ: Oh, definitely. It's hard for me. I'm sure it is for a lot of people. But you see the change of sturgeon spearing. I understand that we have to make changes. But I want them to be able to teach their kids how to sturgeon spear. It's something that – you don't do it all over the world. It's not like hunting or fishing. It's not something that happens everywhere. So, it's just neat that we can experience it, and hopefully, our kids can continue.

DR: You eat the fish too?

AMWZ: Yes, I do. I like it smoked. My husband likes to grill it just with lemon juice and some milk overnight and let it sit and then grill it. I'm not big with it on the grill, but I love it smoked.

DR: Well, do you think you're going to be passing on your stories and experiences to your nieces and nephews and sons and daughters then?

AMWZ: Oh, definitely. We are already [laughter]. Definitely. Some of my best memories are from, like I said, being little and being here and watching all the different sturgeon spearing women and men.

DR: It gets kind of crowded in here on this sturgeon weekend than during the week.

AMWZ: Oh, very crowded. Very crowded. Now that it's half day, it's made it a little less crowded because it's over at 12:00 p.m. So, the guys have more time to do their thing, and then they slowly drag in. Where years ago, when they were all done at dark, and everybody came in at once. It's definitely made a difference, but it's been a good difference. It's been a good

change.

DR: Good. Very interesting.

AMWZ: Yes.

DR: Well, thank you very much.

AMWZ: Yes. Thank you.

[end of transcript]