

The History Corner
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Remembering Clarence "Marv" Swensen

I had started near the mouth of the French River, walking west along the shoreline of the lake. Such a hike would usually be difficult in winter. However, this had been an unusual December. Unseasonably warm weather and a lack of storms had left the shoreline bare and dry. There would be no crashing waves, snow covered beaches, nor icy boulders to contend with this day. Only a slight, off lake breeze broke the stillness as I walked the narrow strip between clay banks and the rocky shoreline. This wasn't going to be just any hike. I had gotten the call earlier in the day that Clarence Swensen had died. Clarence, or "Marv" as he was more commonly known, was one of the last commercial fishermen to work our stretch of the shore. He had helped greatly with the commercial fishing section of the "Roots" book and had generously contributed numerous fishing artifacts and memorabilia to North Shore Elementary so students attending there could better understand the important role that commercial fishing played in our community's history. Today's walk was special. I was doing this one for Marv.

The December sun is an impatient sun, ever eager to set. So, by the time I reached the small ravine that marked Marv's fishing spot less than a hand width separated sun from horizon line. Using what light remained I looked over the area. It was hard to imagine someone had spent nearly all their adult life launching and landing a boat here. Though over fifty years of fishing had gone on at this site there was little evidence left to suggest such activities had ever taken place. Within the last year Marv had dutifully removed and/or burned nearly all vestiges of his small commercial fishing operation. Marv wasn't planning on retiring and he certainly had no desire to pull out of fishing. The removal, in fact, wasn't Marv's idea at all. Rather, it was done by order of the City of Duluth. Apparently having his small boat pulled up on shore and a few buoys and nets in its vicinity had, for whatever reason, suddenly become a problem. To at least one bureaucrat in the halls of Duluth city government Marv's operation was in violation of the Congdon Trust agreement and it was determined, after a half century of fishing, his boat and equipment would have to go.

It didn't seem to matter that Marv had lived nearly all his adult life not more than a few hundred feet across the road from where he stored his fishing equipment. It also didn't seem to matter that Marv was just a couple years short of 80 when the letter arrived telling him he must give up his life's work. To most people it may have seemed more sensible to commend, rather than harass, someone still so filled with the desire and stamina to pull nets and pick fish hand-over-hand. But somehow that view didn't surface; much less resonate, in the minds of those at city hall. Marv fought for a while. After all, having someone tell him he didn't belong on that lake had flared up Marv's feisty side. But when the threat of fines began to reach into the thousands of dollars he knew his days of fishing were over.

As I walked around the isolated site it was difficult for me to understand how Marv's small operation could have offended many people. My guess is that most of us who drove along that stretch of the Scenic Highway didn't even know it was there. Several years ago, shortly after getting to know Marv, I told him that I would like to stop down and see where he was located on the lake. Problem was, I couldn't find it. The next time I ran into Marv I told him what had happened. He looked at me, paused for a moment, and then after carefully considering how he could better explain something that, in his mind, was all ready about as obvious as it could be, said, "Well, you just need to look for the biggest old dead pine tree on the shore, park your car when you do, look for the path and follow it down to the lake, that's where you'll find my spot." I turned now and gazed up towards that path. Alongside it the lifeless and weathered trunk of the old pine still stood, still reaching its uppermost branches to mark its spot in the sky.

It was getting late, but before heading back to the car I went to the edge of the lake, knelt down, and put my hands in the cold water. To the east I could see the long sliver of Wisconsin shore, a pencil-line of darkness that marked the separation between water and sky. I thought of Marv's hands and how many thousands upon thousands of times they had dipped into this lake. Thick and strong, they were hands made to pull nets and pick fish and I can't help but believe that somewhere those hands are still busy at work.