

His Mission Is Fishin'

Five generations of this family have hoisted nets from Lake Michigan.

By Tina Gohr, Kewaunee, Wisconsin

"WIND from the west, the fish bite best."

That piece of fishing folklore is familiar to many. But if Captain Jeff Weborg had his way, he'd mix in a little southerly wind as well. That's because his commercial whitefish harvests off Door County depend on southwesterly winds to pull warm water away from Lake Michigan's shore.



Kewaunee

"In October, the whitefish come in closer to spawn," explains Jeff. "They won't do so until the water temperature falls to 51 degrees. The southwest wind moves the warmer water out, replacing it with cooler water from below."

"You can have millions of pounds of fish out deeper in the lake, but they won't move in near the shore until the water cools."

Based in Gills Rock, J & M Fisheries is owned by Jeff and his brother Mark. In fall, they set their nets perhaps a half mile offshore from Moonlight Bay and Baileys Harbor.

Fishing's Best in October

Jeff and his crew net 300 to 3,000 pounds of whitefish on an average day. At the peak of harvest in October, the yield can run to more than 6,000 pounds per day.

Some of the catch stays in Door County for its famous fish boils. Other fish are sold wholesale to vendors in New York and some are shipped to Europe to be smoked.

These fourth-generation commercial fishermen have worked on Lake Michigan more than 50 years. Jeff and Mark learned the trade from their father, as he did before them. It all began in the

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Photos: Tina Gohr



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1860s when Andrew Weborg, their great-grandfather, arrived in the peninsula from Norway.

Jeff's 30-year-old son Eric, of Sister Bay, represents the fifth generation as he joins his father at the helm of their fishing boat *Heather J*. Also aboard recently was apprentice Andy Stuth of Sturgeon Bay.

I accompanied them on an early October day when two out of five nets produced 1,400 pounds of fish in one lift.

The nets are expansive, covering the equivalent of eight football fields and configured like giant airplanes. The fish follow the "tail" of the plane toward the heart of the net. Tapering "wings" guide them that way. The fish then swim through a small tunnel and are trapped in the body or "pot" of the net.

Trap net boats like *Heather J* are 50 feet long and ride low in the water. These vessels are used to check nets daily during fall spawning season off the tip of The Door. When the catch appears adequate, the nets are hauled onto the open deck where the fish are sorted.

At times when he's not fishing, Jeff uses skills passed down to him to teach others to fish. Twice per year he travels to the city of Lebedyn in Ukraine, where he has taught local fishermen basic netting skills.

"I brought some of my nets and they're now using them in rivers," Jeff says. They're doing well feeding their families."

Jeff has done this mission work for 11 years through a Door County church. "I love the work and I love the people," he says. "They're learning new ways to help themselves. It's an honor to share some of what I've learned fishing here in Wisconsin." 🇺🇸



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