

# Walworth County Sunday

WalworthCountySunday.com

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**SUNDAY**

fyi

**BUSINESS NEWS,  
CLASSIFIEDS  
START ON PAGE 17**

**COVER STORY**

'Everything a tackle box could need or want, guide service, taxidermy ... and a vanishing slice of Americana' makes local bait shop ...

# A REAL KEEPER

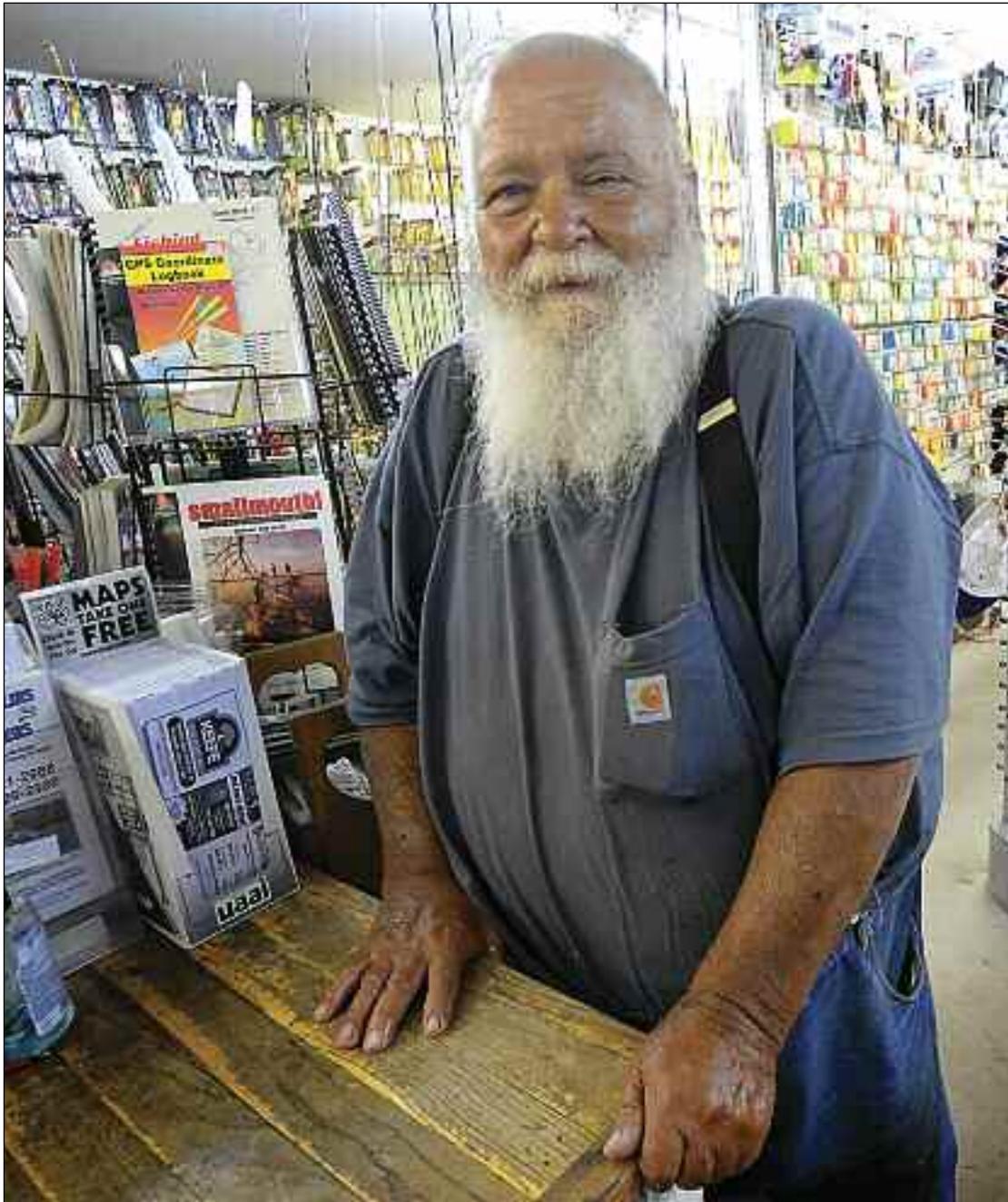
## Fishermen far and wide rely on equipment, advice from local couple

BY LISA M. SCHMELZ  
FOR WALWORTH COUNTY SUNDAY

TOWN OF DELAVAN — On an overcast morning, neither Brian Gates nor his wife, Nancy, are anywhere to be found at their iconic bait store just north of Williams Bay. Behind the counter, and seated at a table possibly constructed from the side of a pontoon boat panel and four wooden fence posts, a petite woman cleans a cooler full of bluegills, crappies and one prized walleye.

"He should be back soon," says Sherry Alcantar, her eyes never lifting from the filet knife, when asked if Brian is around. "He had to go help someone whose boat stalled on the lake."

Watching Alcantar in this cramped shop, overflowing with every imaginable doodad related to fishing, are William Freeman, a retired 40-year veteran of the Chicago Police Department, and his wife, Gracial. It is their



TERRY MAYER/STAFF

**Brian Gates and his wife, Nancy, have run Geneva Lake Bait & Tackle for decades near Williams Bay. The landmark offers fishing gear, guide service, taxidermy, local lore and more.**

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Cancer survivor shares  
her fighting spirit  
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Warhawks pitcher  
ready for more  
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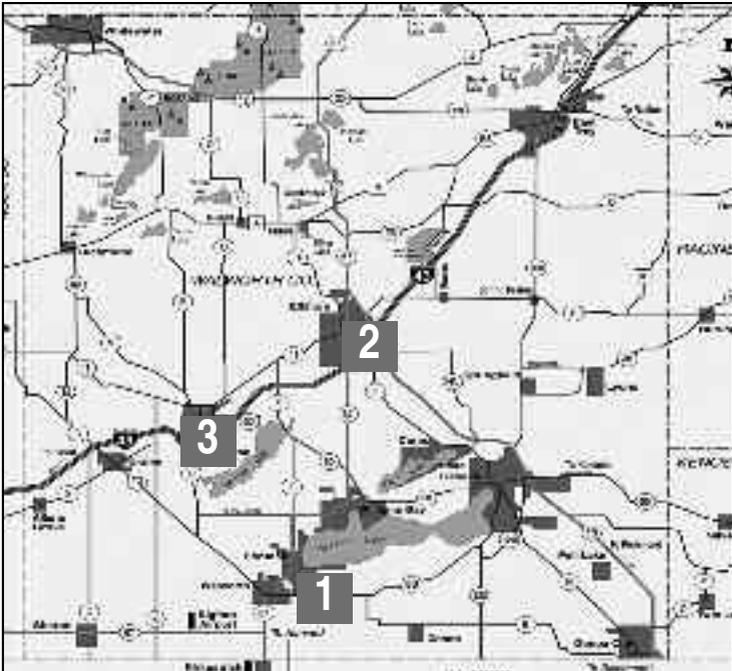


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VERSION OF TODAY'S PAPER

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# WALWORTH COUNTY ALMANAC



## Fontana bridge open to limited traffic

FONTANA — The bridge on South Lakeshore Drive at the Abbey Harbor in Fontana has been repaired and two lanes are open for automobile traffic, according to Fontana Village Administrator Dennis Martin. The bridge had been closed for several days as emergency repairs were made.

The bridge is also open for emergency vehicle traffic, and the sidewalk on top of the bridge is open for pedestrians. The sidewalks under the bridge will remain closed until a new bridge is constructed.

Trucks and trailers, however, are not permitted on the bridge. The posted detour is Wisconsin Highway 67 south to County Highway B, east to Indian Hills Road and north to South Lakeshore Drive.

The bridge has a 10 mph speed limit and a 6,000-pound posted weight limit.

The Abbey Harbor channel under the bridge also is open and will remain open until the replacement project construction begins in the fall.

Further information is posted online at [VillageOfFontana.com](http://VillageOfFontana.com).

## Suspect bound over for trial in corpse case

ELKHORN—A 52-year-old former police officer from West Allis was bound over for trial July 3 on charges of hiding two corpses in suitcases and

leaving them along a rural road in the town of Geneva, where they were discovered June 5.

During his preliminary hearing, Steven M. Zelich sat quietly next to his defense attorney, Travis

Schwantes. Walworth County Sheriff's Department Detective Jeffrey Recknagel testified that Zelich told authorities he met two women — identified as Laura Simonson of Rochester, Minnesota, and Jenny Gamez of Cottage Grove, Oregon — through online websites for bondage, domination and sadomasochistic sex.

Recknagel said Zelich told him that he and Gamez agreed to meet at a hotel in Kenosha County in 2012, and Simonson at a Rochester, Minnesota, hotel in 2013. In both instances, Zelich told authorities he caused the women's deaths while they were having BDSM sex, but that it was accidental. Schwantes argued that his client did not mean to cause their deaths, and Zelich wasn't hiding a crime.

A plea hearing for Zelich is scheduled for July 17.

## New website promotes Delavan to visitors

DELAVAN — Designers of a new Delavan website hope to fill in the gaps in area events and activities listings for a range of websites — from the chamber of commerce to the state Department of Tourism — that are currently available.

The website [visitdelavan.com](http://visitdelavan.com) is part of a larger marketing plan designed to bring people into the city. The plan, funded by room tax dollars, is being overseen by the Delavan-Delavan Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and includes branding, social media outreach, advertising and the website.

— Compiled from [walworthcountytoday.com](http://walworthcountytoday.com) and [gazettextra.com](http://gazettextra.com)

## BAIT

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fish that are being cleaned. For decades, the Freemans have made Geneva Lake Bait & Tackle their go-to place. Here, they find everything a tackle box could need or want, guide service, taxidermy if they so desire and a vanishing slice of Americana. The fish the Freemans catch can be measured and weighed, but their love of this bait shop and its owners cannot. What else explains their detour after a guided trip with Brian this morning to Willowfield, the Delavan nursing home where Nancy is recovering from a car accident?

"We were at Interlaken and were vacationing or something," recalls William Freeman of their first encounter with Geneva Lake Bait & Tackle and the Gates, his voice filled with the same joy heard in any fishing story. "Our kids (were) like 7 or 8 years old, and we came in here and fell in love with the store and them and have been friends ever since."

"We stopped in to see Nancy today after we fished with Brian, and she's doing better," adds Gracial. "She was playing bingo. We hope she gets back here soon."

A few moments after the update on Nancy, Brian Gates ambles in, slightly damp from the earlier rain and whatever wrestling he may have done with the stalled boat. He is a big man, with enormous hands and a squinty gaze.

As he nets a supply of minnows for a customer, it's hard to believe that just a couple of years ago he was the one in frail health and Nancy was running the place. The store he started in 1967 by delivering crayfish to local boat liveries looked like it was taking its final swim upstream. Not only was Brian's health declining, but the big box stores and gas stations were taking a sizable bite out of the bait and tackle business.

Then, like an epic fish-that-got-away tale, Gates managed to break free from the line, or in this case, the tubing connected to his oxygen tank.

"She did a lot then," he says, scooping a few netfuls of minnows. "Now, it's my turn, I guess."

The minnow transaction complete, Brian Gates settles into a metal chair behind the counter. Asked to explain the sea of fishing merchandise surrounding him to a novice, he is happy to inform.

"This is all tackle and accessories," he says. And the difference between the two?

"Tackle is something you actually use to catch a fish," he replies, "and accessories is stuff you wish you had after you caught it."

What does Brian Gates, a guide's guide, use?

"I put some hooks and split shots in my pocket and that's my whole tackle box 99 percent of the time," he says. "It doesn't get much simpler than that."

That his own technique should be so basic is a whale-size irony. Numerous fishing publications proclaim Geneva Lake Bait & Tackle to be the ultimate angler's treasure chest. "Believe it or not," Brian says,



TERRY MAYER/STAFF

The selection of fishing gear seems endless at Geneva Lake Bait & Tackle. Co-owner and veteran fishing guide Brian Gates explains it like this: "Tackle is something you actually use to catch a fish. Accessories is stuff you wish you had after you caught it."

cracking open a can of Diet Squirt, "I've got more terminal tackle than the chains. Hooks, sinkers, lures, ice jigs — I've got them all. I've got more ice jigs than anybody in the world."

How his claims could be verified is uncertain, but think of it this way: If fishing tackle and accessories were people, Geneva Lake Bait & Tackle's is roughly the size of New York City.

### The bait lady

Nancy met Brian on a blind date in Williams Bay. Over a sheepshead card game, she learned he'd been married before and had a son. Six months later, in 1973, they were married and the woman who describes herself then as "painfully shy" says marriage, motherhood and the bait shop began opening up her world.

She acknowledges that neither she nor her approach to customer service have ever been typical.

Wired to call things like she sees them, she won't hesitate to move a customer at the back of the line to the front if she finds him or her to be a good example of citizenship for the rest of us. Such moments are always accompanied by an explanation of why the lucky soul now at the front is someone worth emulating. To those who find her behavior unusual, Nancy offers this bit of history:

"Forty-one years ago, I didn't talk," she said. "They thought I was mad, but I was just shy. Some people that come into the



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shop, they say I'm like the people on 'The Big Bang Theory.' I'm serious. I don't watch it, but I heard it was about a bunch of people who couldn't get along with others and had poor social skills."

Though she may appear cantankerous and laser-focused to some customers, Nancy loves everything about Geneva Lake Bait & Tackle. She has no use for fishing herself, and her last catch was in the '80s. For her, it's about the people.

"The customers, they become your friends," she said. "They make it worthwhile."

Some of those very customers are paying her visits at Willowfield as she tries — literally — to get back on her feet. All who have tried to soften the blow of her car accident by likening it to a vacation, telling her it's her turn to relax and Brian's turn to do it all like she did for him, are quickly told otherwise.

"I miss working," she says firmly. "Wouldn't you? I miss doing all that because no day is the same. It's very boring here."

"It was hard when he almost died. But I don't want any turns. I don't want time off. I just want to get stuff done."

## READ ONLINE



The Robin House offers shelter, support for homeless teens

Read online at [CommunityShoppers.com](http://CommunityShoppers.com)

## WEB POLL

Question:

Do you support an increase in the minimum wage?

- No ..... 36%
- Yes, but less than \$10.10/hour ... 17%
- Yes, to \$10.10/hour ..... 35%
- Yes, to more than \$10.10/hour ... 12%

To VOTE in OUR WEB POLLS, VISIT:

[WWW CommunityShoppers.com](http://WWW.CommunityShoppers.com)

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