

April 12, 1981
Palestine History Club

PEARL DIVING IN THE WABASH

by Glenda Tedford

Did you know that people dove in the Wabash River for pearls? Well it all started in 1905.

An old riverman knew nothing of the value of the pearls, mussels, shells, slugs, spiks, and nuggets. Buyers then came to Hutsonville, Illinois to buy the products of the pearls, mussel shells, slugs, spikes, and nuggets. During that season imperfect pearls were sold by the quart.

A pearl is round. Slugs are found in all shapes and sizes, many being as big as a hazelnut.

During one year some men shipped over 250 pearls. One was sold for \$600.

When the pearl craze really hit towns along the river, there were strange sights to see. In St. Francisville, Ill. you could see dozens of men and boys digging about in the mud of hog pens along the river hopping to find a stray pearl or slug lost from the mussels that had been fed to the hogs.

You can find pearls in almost any color, but they are generally the same tint as the shell that produces them. White pearls are most popular, but pink pearls are in more demand by American women. A black pearl is very rare.

Most people think pearls are shaped like very little balls, pears or buttons. People now days see them in many shapes, such as; petals, lilies, arrowheads all excellent qualities.

The pearl lilies are usually milk-white and the form of a calla. They can be very beautiful in a mounting of green-gold leaves and a diamond center.

Sometimes a button or ball pearl burst its sac, then lodges in another location in the shell to become the nucleus of a baroque pearl.

There are stories about fabulous finds. Of particular interest is the legend of the Queen's Pearl. The Queen's Pearl was a very large pearl that weighed 72 grains. Jumbo Adams of Mt. Carmel, Ill. found the pearl and sold it for \$800. Twenty-four hours after Jumbo Adams sold the pearl, a buyer from New York bought it for \$2,500. Later it made its way to be part of the Queen's Necklace.

WAYS TO FIND THE PEARLS

Finding pearls in the river takes a lot of hard work.

First you need a boat and motor. On each side of the boat are two wooden boards with notches in them. These boards are called standards. On the standards are hung iron bars. These two bars are lined with mussel hooks. These hooks are called crowsfeet.

Each hook is made with two pieces of #11 wire which is about 4 inches long. Another piece of wire is rapped around them to hold them together. The ends are curved up to make hooks. They are tied to a piece of string and then to the bar.

You go to gravel beds in the river and put the bars in the water. They are pulled behind the boat by a thing called a mule. A mule is a piece of canvas which has a board on the top and a rod on the bottom to hold it down.

A string is tied to each end of the rod and brought up to the boat to where two nails are and tied to them.

This is used to guide the boat and also to pull it. The current of the river pulls against it.

The bars with the hooks on them are pulled along the gravel beds until they are full of mussels. They are then pulled out of the river and put on the standards.

The mussels are then picked off and put in the boat. After you get all you can haul in the boat, you go back to shore.

The mussels are then put in a container called a vat. It is a big tub made out of tin to cook the mussels in.

Water is put on the mussels and a fire built underneath.

The mussels are cooked until they pop open.

They are then placed on a wooden tabel and the shells are taken off the meats. The meats are always checked. Along the sides which are called wings sometimes can be found pearls. Some of the pearls are very tiny and some big ones can be found in this way, There have been some very expensive pearls found mussel shells.

There are also things found in the wings of the meats that don't develop into pearls called slugs. These slugs are used to make medicine.

This articie is based on the actual mussel digging. People today are still digging mussels, but the mussel shell is being used in industry. Pearls can still be found if you take the time to look. Pearls will always be popular.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barnes, Sisley, The Great Indiana Pearl Rush, Colorful Variety, Queen's Search, FORD TIMES MAGAZINE, November 1975, pp. 52-57.

Clark, Dorothy J., When the Pearl Craze Hit the Wabash River, From a clipping of the HUTSONVILLE HEARALD, October 12, no year given.

Personal interview with Fred Daugherty, Old York, Illinois. "Ways to Find the Pearls."