

# PEARL FISHING IS UNDER WAY AGAIN

Season Gets Late Start on Upper Reaches of White River.

Special to the Gazette. *Aug 5-1928*  
Mountain Home, Aug. 4.—Pearl fishing on the upper reaches of the White river got under way the first of this month. In another week every shell bed that can be located will be giving up its quota of shells. Shell buyers are in nearly every town on the upper river, competition is keen and the price is good.

Owing to high water during June and the first part of July, the season is a month late. The river is in fine shape for the business. The water is so clear one can see the bottom in the deepest holes, and shell beds are easily located. Norfolk reports the first pearl find of the season on this stretch of river. H. L. Peyton, a shell digger, who started operations the first of this week, picked a small ball pearl from a pair of nigger-head shells Tuesday. It probably will pay him a profit for his first month's work. Several other pearls have been found during the week, but none very valuable.

### Methods of Fishing.

On the lower river mussels are taken with a crowfoot bar and tongs. The crowfoot bar is a one-inch pipe, about 10 feet long, to which are attached small strings every few inches, with a piece of wire about the shape and size of a crow's foot on the end of each. This bar is dragged over a mussel bed, and the mussels close on the crowfeet, and are lifted into the boat. Shell tongs are made with long handles, fastened together like scissors. The tongs are thrust into the mussel bed open, then closed, and the shells lifted into the boat.

Because most of the shell beds on the upper river are in shallow water, this equipment is not needed. The shells are picked up by hand, or are dug with potato forks.

One improvement in equipment on the upper river is in the boats. In former years, most of the shell diggers used the old John boat, common to all streams in the Ozarks. Now nearly all are using motorboats. They are quicker in moving camp from shell bed to shell bed, and in going to the nearest town for supplies.

The shell digger has no trouble marketing his production. Practically every town along the river affords a cash market. Many of the shell buyers operate motorboats in which they visit the shell digger's camp to buy his catch.

Before the White River railroad was constructed, and several years later, the shells were dug for the pearls they contained. No one thought of selling the shells. If the digger failed to find any pearls, he was out of luck. Today, if he doesn't find any pearls, he is well paid for his work, if he is industrious, in the revenue the shells produce.

### Pearl Finds Decrease.

Until 10 years ago, an average of \$100,000 worth of pearls were found annually on the upper reaches of the river. Pearl buyers were in every town, and many buyers came up from Newport. About a decade ago, the annual pearl finds began to decrease, and have been decreasing every year since. Where once the big money in the industry was in the sale of pearls, it now is in the sale of shells. No pearls of exceptional value have been found for five years. In the early days of the industry, it was not uncommon for a good many pearls to be found that would bring as much as \$500 each, and a few as much as \$1,000, and higher. The tonnage of shell produced during the last few years also has shown a decrease.

The scarcity of good pearls probably is due to the fact that for a good many years mussels were taken from the river in large quantities, and the best pearls were found in the older shells. The shells taken from the river now are young, and the pearls have not had time to form. If all shell-digging was discontinued for a quarter of a century, the number of large and valuable pearls would be as great as in the early days of the industry.

## White River Shell Diggers Find Two Valuable Pearls.

Special to the Gazette. *7-4-28*  
Norfolk, Oct. 3.—During the last week two good pearls have been found by shell diggers on the White river near this place. R. B. Perry found a ball pearl that weighs about 25 grains. It is fine color and luster. He has not sold it. W. H. Anderson found a smaller ball pearl which he sold for \$50.

## Pearl Found in White River Is Sold for \$450.

Special to the Gazette. *Oct 9-1928*  
Easy Sylamore, Oct. 6.—H. M. Doty, a shell digger of this place, sold a pearl he found recently to a Newport pearl buyer for \$450. This is the highest price paid for a pearl on the upper White river this season. The gem weighed 20 grains, and was perfect in color and luster.

## Lepanto Mussel Digger Finds Large Lavender Pearl.

Special to the Gazette. *7-4-30*  
Lepanto, July 3.—E. E. Smith who is digging mussels in a drainage ditch southeast of the city found a pearl of lavender color about a 1/2 inch in diameter and weighing 71 grains. He refused an offer of \$100 by a buyer today.

## Flippin Shell Digger Discovers Large Pearl in Mucket.

Special to the Gazette. *7-21-30*  
Flippin, July 19.—R. L. Williams of this place, who has been digging shells in the White river for several weeks, opened a mucket yesterday and picked out a 14 grain ball pearl of perfect shape, color and luster. It probably will bring several hundred dollars.

## SURVEY OF RIVER MUSSEL FAVORED

Arkansas Would Benefit by Proposal of Bureau of Fisheries.

(From the Gazette's Correspondent.)  
Washington, March 25.—A thorough survey of the river mussel, from which pearl buttons and other articles of commerce to the value of several millions of dollars annually are made, is favored by the Bureau of Fisheries of the Department of Commerce. The study would include physical, chemical and biological factors affecting mussel production. An appropriation to take care of the expense involved probably would be necessary.

Arkansas is the second largest mussel producing state, recent figures by the Bureau of Fisheries reveal. It is second only to Tennessee. Michigan, Iowa, Indiana and Illinois also contribute heavily to the mussel shell output, the balance of the American production being scattered over 13 states. The upper Mississippi region formerly produced the main bulk of the mussel shell supply, but with the depletion of its beds, the industry moved farther downstream.

Arkansas is well suited to the needs and tastes of the 500 species of mussels and clams which grow in fresh waters of the United States. Many, though not all, species are found in Arkansas. Forty-one species furnish shells commercially valuable. The two main essentials of life to fresh water mussels are unpolluted running water and an abundance of limestone. Since the young mussels or "glochidia" at one stage of their development attached like stickers to fish, there is a direct relationship between the fish supply and the mussel beds.

Stream pollution and overfishing are the greatest menaces to mussel production, because they reduce the supply of fish without which the mussels are unable to rear their young, the Bureau of Fisheries contends. The bureau hopes as a result of its

contemplated survey to gain data which will aid it not only in restocking old haunts of the mussel but also in developing new breeding grounds within the Mississippi basin and along the Gulf coast.

Seventeen major plants and dozens of smaller establishments are devoted to manufacture of buttons, novelties, etc., from mussel shells. Poultry feed, stucco materials and other by-products are manufactured to the extent of about 27,000 tons annually.

Some varieties of mussel occasionally yield small but beautifully formed pearls.

Although pearl buttons to the number of 20,205,073 gross were produced in the United States during 1929, the last year for which figures are available, even that huge supply proved inadequate to meet the demand. Prices of pearl buttons have advanced from 80 to 40 per cent within recent years.

## Pearl Weighing 56 Grains Found At Clarendon.

Special to the Gazette. *6-24-34*  
Clarendon, June 23.—A fresh water pearl which weighed 56 grains was found here this week by Ira Son, a shell digger and fisherman. Several years ago Son found a perfect pearl which weighed 22 grains, and which he later sold for \$500. Although his latest find is more than twice as large as the other one, it is not perfect in shape or color.

# PEARL AND BUTTON INDUSTRIES IN STATE 40 YEARS OLD NEXT APRIL

First Gem Discovered In Black River In 1897 By Late Dr. J. H. Myers of Black Rock Led To Establishment of Now Flourishing Businesses That Give Many Jobs.

### By TOM SHIRAS.

Black Rock, Nov. 28.—Dr. J. H. Myers, physician, naturalist and business man, who died at Black Rock in March, 1906, found the first commercial pearl in the state, in Black river, in April, 1897, and is properly credited with being the father of the pearl and shell industry. Before he found this first magnificent gem, a mussel was nothing but trot line bait. By his initial discovery, and his subsequent research work on the subject, he gave to Arkansas one of its most fascinating and lucrative industries.

Because it is an industry that any one can enter without asking for a job, and work on his own time, it has brought millions of dollars into the state and provided a livelihood for thousands of families.

### Discovery Not an Accident.

The finding of the first pearl by Dr. Myers was not an accident. He had read of valuable pearls being found in fresh water mollusks, and being of an inquisitive turn of mind started to investigate the mussels of Black river, to see if they were pearl bearing. Luck favored his first efforts. He found a bed of muckets, two miles above Black Rock, and after opening several hundred shells picked up the lucky shell, from which he took a 14-grain ball pearl of pinkish color and fine luster.

The news of the discovery swept rapidly through the Black river country, and people began flocking to the river. Hundreds used only an old tow sack to gather the shells in, and an old knife to open them. Mussels were plentiful then in shallow water and were easily taken. Others, more ambitious, equipped themselves with tongs and a john boat, and fished in the deeper water. Dr. Myers invented the first pair of shell tongs used on Black river. He made his tongs out of two sets of cotton seed forks, set in a shank that allowed them to open and close. They had long handles and about half the length cut from the forks, which made them stiffer. Factory-made shell tongs are made this way today with a few improvements.

During the first two years of the industry, no effort was made to save the shells. Those who dug mussels dug them solely for the pearls that they would produce and thousands of tons of prime shell went to waste. News of pearl-bearing fresh water mussels being found in Black river drifted down to the White river country and the mussels of that stream were investigated, and found to be pearl bearing too. Hundreds went to work on the mussel beds of that stream, and a new industry was born.

The recovery of pearls in 1897 was enormous, but the finders received only a fraction of their worth. Few knew the value of pearls nor how their value could be determined and the few outside buyers who drifted in took advantage of this ignorance and cleaned up large sums on their purchases. Hundreds of fine gems that now probably adorn some wealthy woman's neck in a necklace, were sold from \$5 to \$50, when they were worth up to \$1,000, and even more.

In 1898 the industry drew many more into it than had been engaged in it in 1897, and consequently the find was much larger. All classes engaged in the work, most of them for the profit they hoped to make out of it, others as a fad. Bankers, lawyers, farmers, merchants, their wives and children, mingled on the river bars, all hoping to make a quick fortune by a lucky find.

By the time the 1898 season got well underway most of the people who were engaged in the work had learned something about the value of a pearl and higher prices were paid for the gems, but even then they brought much less than their true value. The next season, however, most everyone was well informed on values and they began to get some where near the worth of their finds. Dr. Myers and W. D. Burd were the principal local pearl

buyers on the Black river, and Dr. Owens of Newport and John Evans of Batesville were the principal buyers on the White. In that year, too, the local buyers began to get more numerous. Many of the more intelligent pearl hunters had learned as much about values as the buyers, and as soon as one of them made a rich find he quit fishing and started to buy.

Dr. Myers shipped the first carload of "nigger head" shells for button making purposes from Black Rock to Lincoln, Neb., in 1899. It wasn't long after this shipment that the local shell diggers found out that the shells were valuable. Representatives from the button factories in the North, began to come in an engage in the business locally. They taught the local shell diggers how to boil the shells and open them, instead of opening them with a knife, which saved a lot of time and made the work much easier in preparing the shells for market. These men also brought with them a device known as the crow foot bar, for taking the mussels, which allowed the diggers to work the deep holes during cold weather from a boat, and the industry became a year-round industry. A market for shells put the industry on a much firmer basis. As long as pearls represented the only value the digger got his income rather uncertain. It was either feast or famine. The shell market gave him a steady income, with the pearls he found representing velvet. While thousands of cars of shells have been shipped from the Black and White rivers, more were shipped in 1902 and 1903 probably than in any other year since.

At that time it took 40 carloads of shells to make one carload of button blanks and the freight on the 40 cars represented enough cash to build and equip a button blank factory. Dr. Myers was quick to see this, and with Dr. N. R. Townsend and H. W. Townsend, organized a company and installed a small button blank factory at Black Rock. This was the first button factory to be established in the South. It began turning out button blanks in May. After the plant had been in operation only a short length of time, the cutters went out on a strike and it was shut down. It was later taken over by an Eastern concern and enlarged, and the plant has been in operation since. After this plant was put in operation several others were installed at different points along the Black and White rivers, and hundreds of cars of button blanks have been shipped from them.

Dr. Myers predicted that the industry would last many years, but that the production of shell would dwindle with the years. This has come true; the shell beds have been drained faster than they can rehabilitate. He foresaw that some protection would have to be given to the mussel if the industry became a permanent one. He doubted that ample protection could be given, because each family of mussels spawns at a different time of the year. He thought that December and January were the only two months in the year that some variety of the fresh water mollusks did not spawn. The matter of protection, however, was solved successfully in another manner. Instead of having a closed season part of the year, certain sections of the streams were closed all the year, which gave the mollusks in that section a chance to rehabilitate.

After devoting considerable research work to the subject, Dr. Myers formed his own opinion about how a pearl forms in a mussel shell. He thought that it was due to a pathological instead of a physiological act. At the time of spawning an ovule or egg failing to be shed, becomes entangled in the tissues between the inner and outer layers of the mantle that lines the shell. In that position it is a foreign body, a source of irritation, and in order to stop the irritation, the juices are collected and segmentation and enlargement of the ovule is the result. The size of the pearl is made all at once instead of growth daily by layer as some hold. The shape of the pearl is merely a matter of chance, being made by the natural action of the mantle turned from hour to hour, so long as it remains in the mussel. All shapes of pearls except the ball are turned in but one direction. The ball pearl turning in all directions, eternally changing position, becomes a perfect sphere.

The variety of colors of pearls, Dr. Myers thought, is caused by the elements upon which the mussel happens to feed. Dark colors predominate in muddy waters or where there is a predominance of mud in the bottom of the stream. Where there is magnesia or iron elements in the water, the colors run to rich pinks, reds and intermediate colors. Copper elements produce bronze and bronze green colors almost of numberless shades.

Besides the time he devoted to fresh water mollusks in Arkansas,

Dr. Myers was one of the best known practicing physicians in his section in his day. He was born at Brandon, Miss., October 22, 1856, graduated at Vanderbilt University, practiced medicine at Newport, in the nineties, then moved to Black Rock, where he died. His wife was Miss Mattie Shumaker.

He was much interested in military affairs and for a time was regimental surgeon for the Arkansas National Guard. He was also division surgeon for the Frisco railroad. In 1903 he served in the legislature as representative from Lawrence county. During his tenure he introduced the first bill for the protection of fresh water mollusks in Arkansas. He also introduced the first bill to create a reform school in the state. During the same session he started the state by the introduction of a bill to sterilize the criminal insane.

## Button Factory for Marianna Is Assured

Marianna — A button factory, employing between 25 and 30 persons, will open in Marianna in about 10 days in a building formerly occupied by the Coca-Cola Bottling Company. P. T. Moss, formerly of Clarendon, who is establishing the factory here, has closed a deal for the building and is moving machinery here. Frank Johnson of Clarendon will be associated with him in the new enterprise. George Crownover of Newport has been employed as manager.

The factory will open with a payroll of \$500 weekly and approximately \$2,000 will be expended each month for shells.

The Marianna and Lee County Chamber of Commerce co-operated with Mr. Moss in locating the button factory in Marianna.

Post-reservation-McJohn Will be the recreation directors in every possible way.

ress Administration's department education and recreation. Mrs. J. Frank Holmes of Pra Grove, chairman of recreation the Arkansas Congress of Parents and Teachers, says that recreation chairmen of local P.-T. A.'s should be ready to co-operate with the recreation directors in every possible way.

Citing types of activities, Mr. Holmes says that some P.-T. A.

### By PAUL HADLEY.

Lazy days are here again! Pearl pronging now claims its own, for the beginning of hot weather, when the water runs low and clear in the rivers, marks the beginning of one of the most unique of part-time industries in Arkansas, mussel digging, or "pearl pronging." The fresh water mussel is abundant in almost every stream in the state, and to some extent all are "fished" to for the bivalves; but the two main sources of supply for shell fishermen are the Black river and the White river. The former has the reputation of being one of the best in the United States for mussel fishing, both for abundance and for valuable pearls that have been found in the shells from time to time.

The Black river is a typical Ozark stream, rising far back in the Ozark mountains of Missouri, leaving the hills a short distance north of the Arkansas line, and skirting the bottom lands into Arkansas, where for several miles it forms the boundary line between the foothills of the Ozarks and the rich fertile bottom lands.

Mussel digging is necessarily an occupation that can be followed only during the summer months, when the water is at its lowest level, and is warm and clear enough so that one can spend hours at a time soaked to the skin. When the season opens, many of those who follow other occupations take to the river banks to try their luck. Farmers, whose crops are laid by will borrow, buy or make a boat, equip themselves with a pair of long-handled shell tongs, and hie to the banks of the river, often camping out for several weeks while they seek the elusive pearl. Many of the Mussel fishermen are regular old-time river men, who spend their entire lives on the river, fishing during the months when they can not dig for shells. Many times these professional shell-diggers, with their families, will live in a tiny houseboat moored at some

out-of-the-way spot along the banks, or in some rude shelter built upon the banks.

Contrary to what many people may think, the life of a shell digger is anything but soft. Hard work is his lot from morning till night, and handling the heavy long handled tongs is a job to tax the strength of any man. Several methods of obtaining the mussel are used, the most common being by the use of the aforementioned tongs. These are heavy iron "scoops," often weighing 25 pounds or more, and fastened to long handles 10 or more feet in length. When the shell seeker has located a mussel bed, where the shells are fairly numerous, he will moor his boat, and let the tongs down into the water until the bottom is reached. Then with a motion that can be learned only by experience, the tongs are filled with the bottom mud, and brought to the top, where the dirt and gravel is searched for the shells. Often many dips will be needed to obtain a single shell, and then again, several of the mussels may be taken at one filling of the tongs. Hour after hour, the

shell digger plies his tongs, a back-breaking job, until he has worked out a particular spot, or decides he has enough of the mussel in his boat to warrant quitting for the day.

Another method of obtaining the mussel is sometimes used in shallow water, and this consists of wading in and feeling about in the mud for the shells, which are thrown out in a pile on the bank or are put in a burlap sack hung about the neck. Where the water is exceptionally clear, the mussel can often be found by wading along in water less than a foot deep on some gravel bar, and looking for the "eyes" of the shell-fish as they protrude from the sand. It takes practice to be able to see these, as the shells are entirely buried except for a small crack at the end, which remains open for the animal to feed.

In spite of the hardships, there is a fascination to the occupation that works upon the gambling instinct of every human. For who knows, no matter how fruitless the hunt has been heretofore, but that the next shell opened will contain a pearl of such value that the lucky finder will be financially independent for many months. But while every seeker for mussel, has this hope in his breast, it is one that has its realization but seldom, less so with the great number of new diggers each year. Many slugs, or imperfect pearls are found, but these bring a low price, at so much an ounce. But even though no pearls are found, the mussel digger can make fair wages if he has a good spot, for the shells are valuable, and can be sold at prices ranging up to \$20 a ton or more, to be made into buttons.

Button-making is one of the peculiar industries of the state. At the factory at Black Rock, hundreds of tons of the shells are made into buttons annually, and shipped to big city markets. The buttons are not finished at Black Rock, the blanks being cut out there, then sent to some other place to be polished and perforated. The shells are brought directly to the factory, which employs 50 or more men, all professional button cutters. The shells are held in the hand by means of a pair of shell tongs, and the discs are rapidly cut out by means of ring shaped saws, kept cool under a spray of water playing upon the teeth while it is running. It takes but a moment to cut all the available blanks out of the shells. Cutters are paid by so much a thousand.

Not all shells are suitable for button-making, however. There are over 20 different species of mussels to be found in Black River, known to the mussel men variously as muskets, (the pearl producers and chief button shells. The purple case knife, and rabbit's foot, a prolific producer of "seed" or very tiny pearls. The Bluepoint or washboards, which produce beautifully colored slug pearls. Monkey faces, and many other designations. The white shells only, are used in button-making, the pink shells being discarded. Pearls are occasionally found in all of them, but the washboards are most prolific, a single shell often yielding over a

dozen variously shaped pink slugs. The muskets, produce the valuable pearls, one such pearl being found years ago in Black river which sold for over \$5,000. Another, is numbered among the crown jewels in a European country, and hundreds of others of great value have been found.

The great numbers of the mussel taken from the waters have depleted their number so seriously that a few years ago a closed season for several years, was enacted by the legislature in order to allow them to increase.

# How Milady Gets Her Buttons

Democrat 6-6-37



Up top, is a mussel digger's shanty on Black river near Corning, and down below is a "pronger" in operation on the same river.

These are the long, lazy days, when shifting from cove to cove in a flat-bottomed boat, is as good a way as any, to pick up a few dollars for the freshwater shell which still brings a fair price in the button market.

Anyway, the mussel's are free for the taking; it is pleasant as pleasant can be, paddling around on the dappled water where the giant trees cast their shade, and "button, button, whose got the button," milady asks as she buys them by the dozen in all colors, shapes and sizes.

Gone are the days though, when only the finest white pearl or those of the "smoked" variety would serve. In the olden days of 60 to 70 years ago, there were too, fine, glass buttons of every shape, often encrusted with gold, beautiful in design and

color tone. There were wine reds, mauves, silver and gray, and mulberry and gold, to decorate the heavy silks and rich velvets.

But ever the pearl button held to the forefront in milady's favor. She was a judge of quality, too, and demanded fine buttons that could be saved and placed on garment after garment for years to come. No silvered specimens for her, but perfect, polished each to be examined minutely before purchase.

Now, any kind of button goes. Synthetic does it. Who cares? A button here today and gone tomorrow, with the old-fashioned pearls reserved for men's summer suits and garments of which the laundries take toll—for what's a button in this day and time?

So paddle your canoe, you mud-puddlers. Enjoy the life and the free fruits of your "pronging," for in the next generation, who will ever have heard of a pearl button?

Clipping from Kansas City Star August 24, 1932, concerning John L. Evans, Batesville, Arkansas.

entitled: An Arkansas Pearl Buyer Finds Thrills in His Work.

John L. Evans of Batesville has devoted a lifetime to his hobby and keeps between 2,000 and 3,000 precious gems in a bank vault. Old legends, such as the one that valuable pearls are found in eating oysters, are exploded. When a real window display is put on.

"Professionally, John L. Evans is the proprietor of a shoe store here, temperamentally he is a lover of pearls.....

"The pearl buyer is required by state law to keep a list of the pearls he buys, together with their weight and price. Besides paying a state occupation tax as a buyer, he also pays taxes to the state and county on each pearl.

"!.....I have between 2,000 and 3,000 pearls in the vault at the bank, purchased over a period of more than 25 years. I can tell you instantly the weight of each pearl, from whom I purchased it, and what I paid for it. ' "