The Great Indiana Pearl Rush

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MENTION INDIANA and people may think of apple cider, farms and hills, factories and steel mills, old songs, Indians—but not pearls. Yet, beginning around 1900, Indiana experienced a pearl rush that involved almost as many fortune seekers as the California gold rush. The fresh-water pearls were genuine. They came from mussels *(genus Unio)* found in the Wabash River.

Actually, the pearl boom was an offshoot of the button business. Before plastic, button manufacturers used mother-of-pearl—a hard, irridescent substance forming the inner layer of the mollusk shell. Fishermen hauled up tons of mussels and sold them to factories along the river banks. When pearls were discovered in a few shells the rush was on.

Along the river and lining the streets of Vincennes (which had one of the largest privately owned button factories in the United States) were hundreds of tiny, ramshackle booths and stalls where the hustle-bustle business of pearl buying and selling took place, day or night, rain or shine. A May issue of the *Vincennes Sun* in 1906 reported:

"So enticing has become the pearl business that farmers and others who need help at this season complain bitterly that the pearl camps have captured the crowd. There are hundreds of camps in view of the city on either bank of the Wabash. There are in this city more than a score of buyers and shipment of a single firm in a day has reached $10,000."

Somebody outside soon realized the immensity of the Vincennes pearl industry. Pearl buyers discovered Indiana's "sweet-water" pearls. Men from Paris, Budapest, Bukhara, and from cities in Spain, Belgium and England invaded the Wabash valley, forming an area of gaudy costumes and exotic language that attracted almost as many onlookers as they did business. The man on the street could always find entertainment in watching these shrewd buyers weigh and examine each pearl. Many of those watching were newspaper reporters, eager for the latest and most exciting pearl story. This report in the *Vincennes Sun,* August 17, 1906, is typical:

"Ben Foster, mussel digger by occupation, found a fine button

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pearl Thursday . . . He cashed a check for $1,000 and took the entire amount home in his pocket."

Pearls were in the news. Average pearls brought $500 to $1,000. There were many sold for $3,000. But for every 32-grain pearl worth $3,000, there were thousands of small, imperfect, odd-shaped pearls called slugs. The French bought these for $15 an ounce, to be used as an important ingredient in face powder.

Pearl craze

Pearls became the fashion. The "refined" woman, not wishing to appear ostentatious, chose pearls instead of diamonds, rubies or other glittery stones. She swathed herself in pearls of all sizes, the more the better. Earrings, bracelets, rings, chokers, stomachers, long ropes almost to her knees. Pearls were in demand and "dabbling in pearls" was the thing to do.

Fishing for mussels was hard work. Most of the musselers worked from flat-bottomed rigs, called Johnboats, equipped with about 75 hooks. The hooks were fastened to a drag bar which, in turn, was attached to the boat with a piece of light rope. The fisherman pitched the drag into the river and allowed the current to pull the boat along. The mussels lay on the bottom with shells open. When a hook touched a mussel, the shell closed about it and held on until pried off. In shallow water musselers resorted to forks and tongs to dig the shells from sand bars. Once the shells were in the boat, the hard work began.

Every musseler's dream was to find a pearl that would put him on easy street. But first the mussels had to be "cooked-out." A fire was built in a tin fire box usually set in the river bank. A bucket of water-covered shells was placed in it so the mussels would slowly steam. Once the mussels were cooked-out, the musseler removed the flesh with his fingers, examining each shell carefully for a pearl. The cooking-out process was a smelly and sweaty operation.

"You sweat to catch 'em and then you sweat to cook 'em out," was a popular saying in Pearl City, a shabby, half-mile stretch along the levee—"home" to most of the mussel fisherman.

Colorful variety

Pearls are found in almost any color, but are generally the same tint as the shell that produces them. White pearls are universally popular, but pink pearls are in the greatest demand by American women. A black pearl is extremely rare.

The average person thinks pearls are shaped like little balls, pears or buttons. But those in the know see fresh-water pearls in many shapes —petals, lilies, arrowheads, all excellent quality. The pearl lilies are usually milk-white and in the form of a calla. They can be especially

beautiful in a mounting of green-gold leaves and a diamond center. Sometimes a button or ball pearl bursts its sac, then lodges in another location in the shell to become the nucleus of a baroque pearl.

Although most pearls found in Wabash mussels were misshaped

slugs of little value, there are stories about fabulous finds. Of particular interest is the legend of the Queen's Pearl.

At the turn of the century, Jumbo Adams, a rough, hard-fisted riverman who lived in Mt. Carmel, Illinois, across the river and downstream from Vincennes, earned a meager living by digging mussels and selling fish. One cold morning Jumbo got up earlier than usual. Feeling as dreary as the bleak, gray morning, he slipped away from his sleeping family and ambled towards the river.

When the sun came up and he felt its first warmth, he gathered a few mussels from the puddles around his mud-encrusted flat-bottomed boat, scooped river water into his shell bucket and dropped in the mussels. They would make a good breakfast. He built a fire in an old fire box set in the river bank and let the mussels steam. When they were done, he poured off the hot water and, picking up the hot shells, tossed each from hand to hand until they were cool enough to pry open with his sharp fishing knife. He ate the cooled flesh from each, saving the largest, an ugly black mussel, until last. He pried it open, then with a forefinger, probed for the meat. Suddenly his finger struck an object as large as a marble. He tore it from its fastening on the shell and stared unbelieving at the largest pearl he had ever seen. It was hot! Quickly he popped it into his mouth so it would cool gradually and not crack in the cold morning air. Then, polishing his find carefully on the sleeve of his coarse shirt, Jumbo left the river's edge and strode swiftly up the street to the nearest pearl buyer's stall.

"We'll give you $800 for it,"

said the buyers. Jumbo, who had never had more than $20 at one time, made the exchange with trembling hands.

Twenty-four hours later a pearl buyer of New York paid $2,500 for the pale blue pearl, which weighed 72 grains. The pearl then found its way to Tiffany's and on to the royal jeweler of England, to become the favorite jewel in the famous Queen Alexandra necklace. According to Anne Hawkins, assistant press secretary to Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Alexandra necklace is normally known as the Dagmar necklace, which was given to the then-Princess Alexandra as a wedding present by her father, the King of Denmark.

The legend of the pearl, as told in a newspaper clipping owned by Frank Stein, nephew of the pearl buyer Milt Iaun, and one of the few people in Mt. Carmel still in possession of Wabash River pearls, reads:

"The most brilliant pearl in the wonderful necklace that the Dow-

ager Queen Alexandra wore at the recent coronation of her son, George V, came from the Wabash River, and was found by Jumbo Adams, who is serving a sentence in the Illinois Penitentiary at Chester." (Soon after Jumbo became "rich," his drinking and boasting got him into real trouble and he shot a man.)

Queen's search

About this time, according to the legend, the Queen's pearl lost the luster and sheen that made it so magnificent. While the royal jeweler sought a match for the "dying" pearl, Alexandra, intrigued and mystified, decided to search out its origin. When she learned that the finder of her treasure was in prison, she began immediate proceedings to set him free. By her generous efforts and those of a Judge Green in Mt. Carmel, Jumbo was freed.

"After the Queen got Jumbo out of prison," a musseler told picnickers one summer evening in 1962, "the pearl came to life again and glowed with its original luster."

Like the pearl, this story refuses to die. It crops up again and again—different details, but always the same theme.

Some of the Wabash River pearls became part of great jewel collections. "Our collection of fresh-water pearls was a gift from B. Durwood Howes of Los Angeles," says Paul E. Desautels, curator, Division of Mineralogy at the Smithsonian Institution. "For many years the Howes jewelry company specialized in and promoted fresh-water pearls and pearl jewelry."

During the '30s and '40s, interest in musseling began to wane. Today, however, there is a revival that stems from the waters of the Orient. Employing the same basic methods of fishing for mussels, today's musseler cooks out the shells, then grinds them into tiny particles called beads. These beads are sent to Japan and used to "seed" salt-water oysters. The result is a cultured pearl. Mussel shells from the Wabash River in Indiana and from the Tennessee River have an extraordinary translucence that makes them particularly valuable to the Japanese.

What has become of the fresh-water pearl?

"I have only a two-year supply and don't know when I'll get any more," laments Alex Kower, a designer and jewelsmith in Scottsdale, Arizona. "A little old man used to show up once a year with a leather pouch full of pearls from the Mississippi and Wabash. He seemed to know just what my work called for. But I haven't seen him in several years."

A few fresh-water pearls are still found by individuals, but the woman who sports a ring set with a valuable pearl is most likely wearing part of a Wabash River mussel that went to Japan and returned inside a cultured pearl. □