

# There were pearls in them thar' streams

**A**dirondackers know it's spring when tubs of night crawlers begin appearing next to the 2 percent milk in convenience store refrigerators. A.C. Rowe didn't have that luxury in 1892, but his search for fishing bait in a Lawrence County brook led to the rare discovery of freshwater pearls. Some of these pearls were made into jewelry, and the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake owns a gold stick pin (artifact No. 77.60) with 21 tiny pearls harvested from those very waters. Rowe, a spruce-gum manu-



ANDY FLYNN

ADIRONDACK ATTIC

facturer, was fishing in Frost Brook, a tributary of the Grass River near Russell. He ran out of bait and opened a mussel or freshwater clam. Inside he found a pink pearl the size of a pea. Rowe soon gave up the spruce gum business and focused his attention on pearl fishing.

"Using long poles with pinchers and boxes with glass for spying the mollusks partially buried in the sand, he and over 80 men and boys from nearby Russell hauled mussels up by the thousands until the surrounding creeks and river eventually became depleted," noted a 1986 "Speaking Artifactually" article in the museum's newsletter.

The decaying river mussels created a bad odor; therefore, town officials required fishermen to open up the mollusks at their own homes. Rowe and others hired gatherers, who sold the pearls to

Tiffany's and diamond merchants.

The St. Lawrence Plain Dealer reported on the local pearl business in the 1890s.

"The pearl fisheries at Russell are the scenes of busy operations these days, and many handsome pearls are found," Plain Dealer stated. "Fifteen bushels of clams are sometimes opened by one person. Various stories are told of the value of some of the pearls found, but \$125 is probably the highest cash price paid for any single pearl."

For the next couple of years, the town of Russell

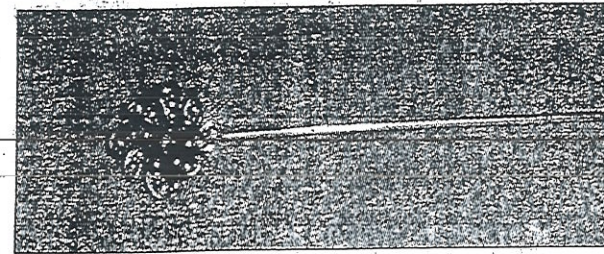


Photo courtesy of the Adirondack

Pearl stick pin, artifact No. 77.60

enjoyed a thriving business in freshwater pearls, but in 1894 the supply was nearly exhausted. The same thing happened in the 1850s during the American Pearl Rush.

The Pearl Rush began in 1857 in a New Jersey stream,

where a pearl found in a mussel was eventually bought by Tiffany's for \$2,500 according to G. Thor Watters, of the Ohio Biological Survey and

Please see ATTIC F

## Attic: Stick pin part of museum collection

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Ohio State University Aquatic Ecology Laboratory. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) differs on the location of the find, stating Ohio as the source, but both agree that the Pearl Rush led to the killing of hundreds of thousands of mussels throughout the United States in pursuit of freshwater pearls.

Soon after the Pearl Rush, entrepreneurs were harvesting mussels for mother-of-pearl shells to use in the button-making industry. Now these mollusks are used for the cultured pearl industry, where pieces of mussel shell are inserted into pearl oysters and used as nuclei to start the pearl-making process.

Freshwater native clams

are now the most endangered animal group in North America, according to the USGS.

Pearl buyers continued to visit Russell at least once a year after the St. Lawrence County Pearl Rush was over. From 1915 to 1920, Floyd Conant regularly drove a buyer, allegedly from Tiffany's, from the railroad station at DeKalb to Russell. On his last trip, the buyer gave Conant the gold stick pin (artifact No. 77.60) set with Grass River pearls as a memento. The pin eventually passed into the hands of Conant's brother, Leland Conant, who, with his wife, presented it to the Adirondack Museum in April 1977.

On the stick pin, eight petals are arranged around the center of the "flower" that

makes the pin-head. The petals each have two or three pearls with a single pearl (no larger than a sesame seed) with a bluish hue at the center. The petals form a spiral one-fourth inch in diameter, about the size of a person's fingernail. The pin is 2 1/4 inches long.

Any mollusk that produces a shell can produce a pearl. Naturally occurring pearls are rare, found in one of every 10,000 animals, according to the American Museum of Natural History.

For more information about the Adirondack Museum, visit the museum's Web site at [www.adirondackmuseum.org](http://www.adirondackmuseum.org) or call 352-7311.

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Andy Flynn lives in Saranac Lake and can be reached via e-mail at [adkattic@yahoo.com](mailto:adkattic@yahoo.com).