

Heyday in Russell

Pearls Of Great Price

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One of the brief though lucrative enterprises which seized the imagination of residents of our county was the pearl fishing one.

The first gem was found in the summer of 1892 by Mack C. Rowe, the spruce gum manufacturer of Russell. While fishing for trout in Frost Brook, a small tributary of the Grass River, about a mile out of the village he ran out of bait. When he opened one of the fresh water clams from the bottom of the creek, intending to bait his hook with the juicy morsel, he was amazed as a perfect pink pearl as big as a pea fell out. He pocketed the gem, and in a few weeks had a report from a New York City expert that it was a perfect pearl and was offered a good price for it.

With this word, Mr. Rowe abandoned his spruce gum business and put his business ability behind pearl fishing. He went about it systematically, by hiring several men and boys. He invented a viewer--a glass-bottomed wooden box about 12"x 14". It was watertight at the bottom and open at the top, so that when it was lowered through the surface of the shallow water, one could quickly see the necks of the bivalves pushing up through the sand.

To get the clams out of the extremely cold water, Mr. Rowe made a long handled spud of bamboo or other light-weight wood. It was 6-8 feet long, with two pieces of steel connected to a spring, holding them together. The fishers could then clamp onto the clams in deep water and bring them to the surface. They dressed in hip boots for this cold and wet job.

They opened them immediately in a great pile on the banks of the creek. Finally local residents complained of the odor of the decaying clams and town officials required the gatherers to carry the unopened clams to their homes for search.

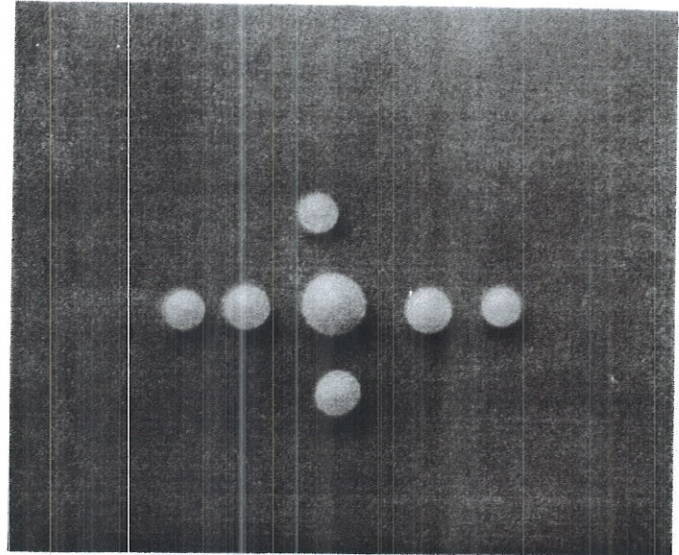
The men transported them in large burlap bags with handy straps for slinging over their shoulders. Mr. Rowe supervised the opening of each shell, thoroughly searching for pearls of all sizes. Sometimes they slaughtered huge quantities of clams before any pearls were discovered. They never thought of eating the clams themselves.

Mr. Rowe's success attracted others and soon nearly every man and boy in Russell was spending leisure moments in the hunt. Frost Brook soon became barren of clams and they turned their attention to Plum Creek, which in two years was entirely denuded of clams. They then transferred their search to the nearby Grass River.

Four to eight men were employed regularly by Rowe, at \$1 to \$1.50 a day by 1894 and they found some fine gems. Charles Hepburn, Jr., O.B. Doolittle, P.G. Carr, Avery Towne, Willard Howland and John and Albert Gibbs followed the "Pearl King's" successful venture.

Most of the pearls were sold to Tiffany and Company and to A.S. Gardiner & Co., New York diamond merchants. Scores were found 1/8" in diameter which brought \$10-\$15, and many from 1/4" to 1/2", \$30 - \$60. The largest perfect pearl, taken by Mr. Rowe, measured 3/4" and weighed 68 grains. It was of perfect pink luster and worth "a small fortune," as reported at the time. The most valuable one sold by Rowe brought \$1400. The next largest on record was found by Charles Hepburn, Jr. and was 5/8" in diameter ("larger than a robin's egg") and weighing 58 grains. One of the lovely pearls was sold to Charles A. Kellogg, the county district attorney, in 1900 or so. Mr. Kellogg had the gem set into a ring for his wife.

Pearl bearing mollusks were always found in swift water, in rapids or just below them, with stony or gravelly bottom. Most of Plum Creek runs now through state land where one can fish but parts of it are on privately owned property. As a fisherman wets his fly these days, he hardly ever thinks of the days when pearl fishing was "big business" in Russell and along the Grass.



PEARLS OWNED BY HERBERT JUDD, CANTON, and taken from Grannis Brook, somewhere between Boyden Brook and Crary's Mills by the James family about 1890. Tiffany & Co. bought some. These are perfect. The picture is only slightly enlarged.

Until the creeks and river were entirely denuded, one could see almost any day from ten to forty boys and men, in rubber suits or boots, with boxes strapped to their faces, wading up river against the current, nipping at the protruding necks of unsuspecting clams, like some other-world creatures.

Pearls ^{IN} THE Mouth.



BEAUTY AND FRAGRANCE

Are communicated to the mouth by

SOZODONT,

which renders the teeth pearly white, the gums rosy, and the breath sweet. By those who have used it, it is regarded as an indispensable adjunct of the toilet. It thoroughly removes tartar from the teeth without injuring the enamel.