A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CLAMMING AND PEARLING INDUSTRY IN PRAIRIE DU CHIEN, WISCONSIN

A Seminar Paper
Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
Wisconsin State University at LaCrosse

In partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Course
Hist. S.S. 761--Research and Seminar in History-Social Science

by
Eric F. Temte
July 1968
Candidate: **Eric F. Bata**

I recommend acceptance of this seminar paper to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of this candidate's requirements for the degree Master of Science. The candidate has completed his oral seminar report.

_July 26, 1968_  
Stanley R. Bolmeck  
Seminar Paper Advisor

This seminar paper is approved for the Graduate College:

_July 29, 1968_  
James H. Erickson  
Dean, Graduate College
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. THE PEARL BUTTON INDUSTRY CREATES A DEMAND</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOR FRESH-WATER MUSSELS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin of the American pearl button</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion of the industry</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. CLAMMING AND BUTTON CUTTING IN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRAIRIE DU CHIEN</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning of clamming</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Button cutting in Prairie du Chien</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. PEARLING IN PRAIRIE DU CHIEN</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearl hunting</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearl buyers</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE DECLINE AND REVIVAL OF CLAMMING</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What happened to the clamming and button industries?</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revival of clamming in the 1960's</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

THE PEARL BUTTON INDUSTRY CREATES A DEMAND FOR FRESH-WATER MUSSELS

One of the most colorful chapters in American history occurred in the period from 1891 to 1920 when the pearl button industry was king on the upper Mississippi River. Prairie du Chien played a very important part in this story as the fresh-water pearl capital of the United States. Many fortunes were made there in the pearl and button industries. Around the turn of the century hundreds of people made their living from clamming, button cutting, and pearl hunting.

Until World War I, tent cities of clam fishermen sprang up each summer on the banks of the Mississippi River around Lansing, McGregor, Prairie du Chien, and Harpers Ferry. Whole families spent the summer gathering shells, and grocery boats plied the river selling packaged supplies. That was the heyday of the wild pearl.

Origin of the American Pearl Button Industry

The use of mussel shells for the making of fresh-water pearl buttons, the principal branch of the button industry for many years, dates from 1891. Buttons of brass and wood have been made in this country since about 1750,
metal has been used since 1800, horn since 1812, marine shells since 1855, and composition materials since 1862.¹

Long before 1891, it occurred to various persons that fresh-water mussel shells were useful for button manufacture. There was an industry on the Ohio River involving the carving of cuff buttons from mussel shells as early as 1802. In 1872 a man in Peoria, Illinois conceived the idea that the pearly shells of the Illinois River would have a value for manufacturing purposes, and he collected some of them and shipped them to Germany. These shells were never used for making buttons, but they did play a part in the establishment of the industry twenty years later. Another shipment of shells was sent from Beardstown on the same river to a factory in the East about 1876, but no commercial use was found for the material. A more practical venture appeared in 1883, when a commercial plant in Knoxville, Tennessee, started making buttons and novelties from the shells of the Tennessee River. Unfortunately, the factory ceased operating after a short time, probably because of the lack of suitable machinery. In the late eighties pearl-

button factories were in operation in Cincinnati, Ohio, and St. Paul, Minnesota, using imported ocean-pearl shells as raw material. Although these plants were located on the very banks of good shell-bearing streams, there is no evidence that the owners even experimented with the material. ²

There were several reasons why the early attempts to use fresh-water shells were unsuccessful. The use of any form of pearl for button making was not widely practiced in the United States, and, in the countries where the manufacture was principally pursued, fresh-water shells of suitable quality were unavailable. Furthermore, the river shell is quite distinct from ocean pearl in its qualities, so that the same machinery and methods do not work well with both kinds of shell. ³

J.F. Boepple must be given credit for the practical initiation of the fresh-water pearl button industry, "a man of singular tenacity of purpose, indefatigable and unyielding by nature." ⁴ His characteristics did not adapt him for commercial success, but they did enable him to battle against the varied obstacles that would have overwhelmed a

weaker or less persistent character.\textsuperscript{5}  

Boepple was a turner and button worker in Ottensen, Germany, near Hamburg, when a friend and fellow worker brought to the shop a box of shells of a kind entirely unfamiliar to them. He said that they had been shipped to his father from America many years before, but he did not know where they came from, except that they were taken from a river somewhere about two hundred miles southwest of Chicago. After some experimentation they concluded that these mussel shells would be good material for making buttons. In the following year Boepple sold his business and, taking with him a turning-lathe and some other trade tools, embarked for America where he landed in 1887. He first engaged in farm work near Gibson City, Illinois and a little later stopped at Petersburg, Illinois on the Sangamon River. One day while bathing he cut his foot and upon examination of the cause found the bottom of the river covered with mussel shells. At last he had found what he had been looking for, but there was still a problem. He was without capital in a strange land among strange people and unfamiliar with the language.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{5}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{6}Coker, \textit{loc. cit.}
The immigrant spent the next few years in farm work, but during this time he located other shell beds, in the Rock River near Rock Island, Illinois, and in the Mississippi near Muscatine, Iowa. Also during his spare time he rigged up his old fashioned foot-power lathe and tried it on a clamshell. The button blanks he turned out were excellent. He polished them, drilled the thread holes, and took a dozen finished buttons to a Muscatine dry goods store. He accepted the owner's offer of ten cents for the lot. 7

Boepple went fishing again, but this time he devised a set of hooks especially to catch clams. He caught a boat load of them easily, boiled them out on the bank, and carried them home in a wagon. At odd hours he converted them into buttons, which he sold to Muscatine stores. 8

Boepple then went to Muscatine where he enlisted the financial and mechanical assistance of Willis Molis and R. Kerr, and there they launched the first button factory in the early part of 1891. 9

This factory did not succeed against the various difficulties confronting a new venture, but it did help many men to see the future possibilities of the industry.

7 Wooley, op. cit., p. 114.  
8 Ibid., p. 115.  
9 Ibid., p. 116.
It was not until 1895, after several factories in the hands of various parties were in operation, that the industry could be said to be fairly established.  

**Expansion of the Industry**

The greatest expansion occurred in 1897 and 1898, when interest in the industry began to spread. In 1897 there were thirteen button or blank establishments in four cities on the Mississippi River, while in 1898 there were forty-nine plants in thirteen towns on the same river, besides at least twelve factories in as many different cities somewhat inland. The territory of the new industry then extended from Omaha, Nebraska, to Janesville, Wisconsin, and Cincinnati, Ohio, with the center at Muscatine, Iowa where there were twenty-eight blank-cutting plants, or "saw-works," as they were then called, and five complete factories.

The next great advance came in 1901 with the invention of automatic facing and drilling machines; subsequent invention (1903) combined these into one apparatus, the automatic facing and drilling machine.  

As the demand for fresh-water pearl buttons increased, the number of men making their living by clamming mushroomed.

---

In 1897 it was reported that in the eight miles between Clinton and Burlington, Iowa over three hundred persons engaged in mussel fishing. In 1898 there were one thousand fishermen between Fort Madison and Sabula, Iowa. There were one hundred fishing from Muscatine alone.  

As the beds in the Muscatine area became exhausted, clamming operations extended northward. All along the upper Mississippi clammers' scows drifted. Guttenberg, McGregor, and Lansing, Iowa, Lynxville, Prairie du Chien, Genoa, LaCrosse, and Trempealeau, Wisconsin had beds. Lake Pepin proved to be a "gold mine" of the mussel and tons upon tons were lifted from its bottom. There was clamming activity at Prescott, Wisconsin, and as far north as St. Paul.  

---


13 Ibid.
CHAPTER II

CLAMMING AND BUTTON CUTTING IN PRAIRIE DU CHIEN

As the search for clams for the button factories spread northward from Muscatine, many towns along the Mississippi became involved in the pearl button industry. Prairie du Chien was no exception. For a period of almost two decades clamming and button cutting played a very important part in the economy of the city and the area. It was almost as important to the community in its day as the fur trade had been in earlier times.\(^1\)

Beginning of Clamming

Clamming started in Prairie du Chien when Captain John Fox sailed up river in his two-masted boat, the Blue Bell. Captain Fox, coming up the east channel, moored his boat just below and south of the railroad pontoon bridge in the fourth ward.\(^2\)

Fox came there from the vicinity of Muscatine, Iowa, clammed there, and took the shells back during several seasons.


\(^2\)Interview with Louis and Ernie Favre, December 31, 1956, by M.J. Dyrud, Notes in possession of Mr. Dyrud.
Soon the local people discovered that shells could be sold for button making. Two local men, Louis Favre Sr. and Jack Fernette worked for Captain Fox. A brother of Louis and Ernie Favre married a daughter of John Fox and moved to Texas. 16

Interest pyramided and the industry grew so fast that Fox could not possibly direct and control the clamming in the area. City folks, farmers, and transients swarmed in to clam the river. Steamers came, one after another with empty barges, to load the shells which the clammers sold for cash to the shell buyers. Soon after one barge was filled and headed down-stream another would follow. 17

There were many good clam beds in the Mississippi River near Prairie du Chien. The best were at York Landing a few miles North of that town, and at Lynxville where the federal authorities later constructed a dam. Although these were the best places for clamming, shells could be found all along the river. Many shells were available right in front of the city of Prairie du Chien. 18

At York Landing, clammers threw away all shells

16 Ibid. 17 Ibid. 18 Reminiscences of John Peacock, Tape recorded interview, (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin)
except the "niggerhead," for at that time the clam buyers bought only this one type. They were particularly desirable for making buttons because of their pure white shells. Clam boats dragging the river for pearls and shells were so thick at this spot that it appeared that a person could cross the river by stepping from one boat to another. 19

There were several different methods of gathering clams, but most common on the Mississippi was the use of a "john boat" and crowfoot bars. A john boat was a flat bottomed boat sixteen to twenty feet in length, with sloping prow and stern. From the side of his boat the clammer threw out his crowbars. These were small rods fitted with short lines to which were attached many little grappling hooks. As the hooks dragged the mud bottom of the clam bed, they caught in the open shells of the feeding clams or mussels. The clams reacted by closing their shells, actually hooking onto the clammer's lines. The operator pulled up the crowbars with a winch and removed the clams. A floating pass was again made over the clam beds. The john boats were propelled over the beds by the current of the river. To help move the boat at a steady pace the clam- mers used a "mule," an underwater sail which was lowered.

19Interview with Louis and Ernie Favre, op. cit.
into the water at right angles to the current.20

In the summer clammers' tents lined the Mississippi River shore. An enterprising Prairie du Chien grocer operated a store launch, delivering food and supplies to river customers. The river men welcomed this service since they were up at dawn and worked until dusk raking clams into their boats.21

When the clams were brought to shore the shells had to be separated from the clam meat. The Mississippi river clammers used a method called the "boil out," by which they steamed clams in a large cauldron. This process opened the shell wide so that the meat could be shaken out and inspected for pearls.22

The clamming industry was at its height in Prairie du Chien from about 1900 to 1912. In 1903 at least one thousand people engaged in shell and pearl fishing in that vicinity. Hundreds of boats were on the river on Saturdays. One fisherman unloaded about a thousand pounds of clams taken during one day and estimated that the cleaned shells would weigh about eight hundred pounds. Another man had

seven hundred pounds cleaned up from one day's fishing.\textsuperscript{23}
The shells gathered by the clammers were sold to local button factories or shipped to other concerns down river. The fishermen made a very comfortable living from clamming during the good years.

At first the button factories would take only "niggerhead" clams, but as the demand increased they found that other kinds were also suitable for button making and began to buy all varieties. In 1901 the steamer Monarch towed barges of shells to Dubuque. One shipment of two barges of shells brought two thousand five hundred dollars. The price of shells in 1901 was about twelve dollars per ton.\textsuperscript{24} By 1903 it had risen to twenty dollars because of the increasing demand from the factories and the dwindling supply. In 1903 a fisherman could get only a half ton of shells a day, compared to about a ton in 1900.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{Button Cutting in Prairie du Chien}

Prairie du Chien had one large button factory and

\textsuperscript{23}"Priceless Pearls Found Quite Often While Clamming was Going Strong," \textit{Courier Press}, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, September 10, 1952.

\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Courier Press}, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, November 5, 1901.

several small one and two-man operations. These enterprises cut blanks only and did not produce finished buttons. On June 26, 1899, a button factory opened in part of the Dousman block on the corner of Main and Bluff streets. The building had once been used as a dry goods store. The light and spacious room in which the operators of the button cutting machines worked contained twenty-four stands. The machinery was driven by a twenty-five horsepower steam engine made by the Phoenix Manufacturing Company of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Charles De Lorimer was the engineer and he superintended the placing of the machinery.26 Harvey Chalmers and Sons of Dubuque, Iowa, leased the button cutting plant in 1905 and increased its capacity to accommodate one hundred employees.27 The Chalmers company operated the facility at this location until 1912. The owners readily shipped the button blanks by railroad, for the factory was only a mile from the tracks.

In 1912 the owners decided to move the plant to a better location closer to the river and the railroad. To

26 "Button Cutting was Big Business Here Around the Turn of the Century," Courier Press, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, September 10, 1952.

27 Courier Press, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, December 12, 1905.
keep the business in Prairie du Chien, the city constructed a building in the Fourth Ward, near the river and next to the tracks of the Milwaukee Road. The Chalmers company leased the building from the city and operated the button factory there until 1933. Throughout this period the concern employed as many as one hundred men, mostly in the winter. Many of the men would work outdoors in the summer, clamming or pearl hunting, and then cut buttons in the winter. 28

Along with the large button factory there were several small cutting operations in Prairie du Chien. Louis and Ernie Favre operated one of these establishments. Louis Favre set up a shack on the corner of North Main and West Washington Streets. The Favres sold the button blanks they cut to factories in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, Muscatine Iowa, and Amsterdam, New York. 29

When Louis and Ernie were first cutting, only "niggerhead" shell blanks were accepted by the buyers. Louis experimented in cutting sand shells and obtained fine looking blanks. At that time sand shells could be bought for one dollar a ton. The next time a buyer from a finishing plant

28 Information from Joe Mara, Prairie du Chien button cutter, Personal interview, June 14, 1968.

29 From Personal interview with Louis Favre, by M.J. Dyrud, January 8, 1956, Notes in possession of Mr. Dyrud.
came, Louis asked him to examine the blanks and offer a price for them. The dealer purchased all he had for ninety dollars per ton. He also offered to finance Louis in setting up thirty saws and to buy all his production. Louis who then had four saws, expanded the supply to six, but decided not to try to set up thirty because labor for cutting was not easy to obtain then. After this all cutters began using sand shells as well as niggerheads.\textsuperscript{30}

Not all button blanks sold for the same price. Their value was determined by size and the quality of the shell from which they were cut. In purchasing blanks a buyer would reach into a sack and pick out ten samples from which he would establish the quality grade. When the ten samples were graded he would make an offer on the whole sack.\textsuperscript{31}

After the button blanks were cut from the shells there were huge piles of scrap left over. One use made of this refuse was for paving. Button factories in Prairie du Chien dumped their discarded clam shells on the Slough Bridge and Bluff Street as well as other Prairie du Chien streets. The shells when spread out made a hard and durably surfaced thoroughfare.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30}Ibid. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{31}Ibid. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{32}"Clam Shell Paving," \textit{Courier Press}, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, September 10, 1952.
CHAPTER III

PEARLING IN PRAIRIE DU CHIEN

Clam shells sold to button factories afforded bread and butter income for the clammers. During good years about fifty-five thousand tons of shells, "niggerheads" and others, largely obtained from the Mississippi River between Quincy, Illinois and La Crosse, Wisconsin, were sold annually. However it was the pearls that provided the dominant lure for many fishermen. 33

Pearl Hunting

There was always the dream that the "haul" would disclose the perfect pearl. Many pearls were found, and sometimes the fisherman's hopes would be realized in a gorgeous, perfectly round, white or rosy pink gem of incomparable lustre. The finder would receive what to him meant wealth, the pearl buyer would sell it in New York or abroad and make perhaps ten times what the fisherman received. 34

Poor pearls or slugs (misshapen pearls) were often found in fresh water mussels, but a perfect gem was rare.

33Dyrud, op. cit., p. 190.
34Gregory, op. cit., p. 253.
Fresh-water pearls are of many different colors, usually depending on those of the mother shells. "Washboard" clams usually have pink pearls, as do the "wavy-backs." The "three-ridged" shells usually have colored pearls in shades of blue, green and lavender. "Niggerheads" have iridescent pearls, white gems with shifting tones of blue and pink. From the "muckets" come fine pink pearls, and sandshell mussels often have pearls of salmon and salmon pink. From the little "lady-finger," whose mother-of-pearl is often slaty or blue black, come the prized black pearls with flames of blue and violet iridescence.35

Before the day of the cultured pearl—in the early 1900's—"wild" pearls commanded high prices. At one time there were twenty-seven pearl buyers registered in Prairie du Chien, people from India, France, England, and various parts of the United States. In 1903 the town was known all over this country and Europe as the central mart of the American fresh-water pearl.36

Clammers found most of the pearls while boiling out the shells that were to be sold to the button factories. While shaking the meat from the shells they would inspect

36 Reminiscences of John Peacock, op. cit.
it for pearls. However there were also many people who came in the summer just to hunt such prizes. The stories of people who made their fortune in one summer by finding a rare gem or two are numerous. A number of Prairie du Chien homes were built with the proceeds of the sale of single pearls. Some fishermen received as much as one thousand dollars for a good specimen.

The following news items from 1902 illustrate the success that many people enjoyed in pearl hunting:

Charley Herrin of Patch Grove found a perfect round forty-five grain pearl and sold it to Mr. P.O. Heide for one thousand dollars. Godfrey Cardine of Prairie du Chien found a fifty-four grain pearl on May 28, and sold it to Mr. Heide for two thousand dollars.  

Albert Reiser sold a forty grain pearl for one thousand two hundred fifty dollars. Many small pearls are being found every day here.  

Mr. Dan Cardin found a perfect forty-five grain pearl on Tuesday and sold it to Mr. Heide for one thousand three hundred dollars. It is one of the nicest round white pearls found this season.  

The chance of finding a valuable pearl lured many part-time pearl hunters to Prairie du Chien in the summer of 1902. To accommodate these people, Charles Fox operated

37**Courier Press**, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, June 10, 1902.  
38**Courier Press**, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, June 17, 1902.  
a boat to take out parties of twelve to twenty persons who
wanted to fish for pearls. The cost was six dollars a day.40

Pearl Buyers

Prairie du Chien in the north and Newport, Arkansas
in the south were the pearl centers which buyers from all
over the world visited. There were also many resident
pearl buyers who were continually on the lookout for valuable
gems. Prairie du Chien buyers included P.O. Heide, Frank
Honzel, William Moore, Edward Mertner, L. Cornelius, and
John Peacock. W.H.C. Elwell of McGregor, Iowa also bought
there.41

L. Cornelius was the first Prairie du Chien dealer
to purchase pearls on a large scale, starting about 1900.
He had formerly lived in New York and was a jeweler. In
1900 he traveled to New York and disposed of hundreds of
fine gems. Cornelius realized a small fortune from the
pearl industry.42

Another early pearl buyer, William Moore, exhibited

40 Courier Press, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, July 22, 1902.
41 Dyrud, op. cit., p. 192.
42 "Priceless Pearls found Quite Often While Clamming
was Going Strong," Courier Press, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin,
September 10, 1952.
in 1901 the finest collection of fresh-water gems ever brought together in the upper Mississippi region. The display included one thousand pieces, among them a black pearl of thirty-eight and one-half grains.43

Some of the most interesting stories were told by John Peacock who was an enthusiastic pearl buyer for over fifty years. In his reminiscences Peacock tells about the biggest fresh-water pearl he ever handled. It was the "Genoa Pearl," from the famous bed at Genoa, Wisconsin, and was found in 1903 by Willis Hastings. It was nut-sized and weighed two hundred and ten grains. Measuring fifteen-sixteenths of an inch in diameter, this pearl was too big for any gem use, but was an impressive collector's specimen. Peacock sold this gem for fifteen hundred dollars, and it eventually went to England to become part of the crown jewel collection.44

There was such great competition among pearl buyers for the finest gems that each dealer had agents along the river to provide information on those that were found. Peacock would go after such prizes by boat or train.

One night in 1907, a commercial fisherman was in a

43Courier Press, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, March 11, 1902.
44Reminiscences of John Peacock, op. cit.
Harpers Ferry, Iowa, saloon showing his friends a fine pearl he had found that day while clam fishing. The bartender sent a message to John Peacock in Prairie du Chien, urging him to appraise the find before the fisherman sold it to someone else. Peacock arrived late in the night and made his appraisal by lantern light. Here was a forty-two and one-half grain iridescent beauty. It seemed that all the colors of the rainbow danced in this gem. In the lamplight it looked perfect. Peacock offered one thousand dollars for the pearl and the fisherman took it. Peacock said it was the finest that he ever had, although he later paid more money for others.45

This gem was known as the "Ismal Pearl," named for Dick Ismal, the man who found it. Peacock sold the pearl to a fine arts dealer in Chicago for five thousand dollars, the most he had received for a gem up to that time. The Chicago dealer then sold it to a New York buyer for ten thousand dollars. At the Chicago man's suggestion, Peacock called on this buyer the next time he was in New York. The dealer remembered the gem and said that he had sold it in England for twenty thousand dollars.46

45Ibid.

Not all pearls found in the mussels are valuable gems. They are formed by the same glands that form the mother-of-pearl inside a bivalve's shells. When a small irritating particle happens into a clam shell and cannot be ejected, the clam secretes liquid pearl around the substance, evidently to reduce the irritation. This substance is built up in layers, and so a pearl can be peeled like an onion. Most of these mother-of-pearl concretions are misshapen slugs or baroques, which may be valuable for costume jewelry but not as gems. Baroque pearls come in all colors and were in great demand for rings, although they did not bring nearly the price of the perfect round gems.47

Other substandard pearls resulted from too much exposure to heat and weather. A few buyers developed a skill for peeling these gems. The work was exacting and every attempt was a gamble with unknowns, but the rewards were high. To buy a pearl for five hundred dollars, peel it, and resell it for fifteen hundred dollars back to the same dealer proved a very rewarding gamble for John Peacock. He was the only buyer in Prairie du Chien who had perfected this art. To peel a pearl Peacock used a bevel-edged knife. He would scrape off a layer of pearl and then polish the

remaining part with pumice stone and common rouge.\textsuperscript{48}

Many times Peacock increased the value of a pearl by peeling off the outside skin to reveal a perfect gem beneath. One time he bought a thirty-two grain pearl for two hundred dollars from a boy in Lake City, Minnesota. The lad found the gem on a beach and it had lost its lustre from setting out in the weather. Peacock peeled this specimen and sold it for two thousand seven hundred dollars.\textsuperscript{49}

Another time he bought a pair of pearls for four hundred and fifty dollars, peeled them and then sold them for fifteen hundred dollars.\textsuperscript{50}

An interesting story is told of a fisherman in Northeastern Iowa who once bought some clam meats for catfish bait. He returned to his house one afternoon, cleaned his catch, and threw the remains of the fish to the chickens. As he sat on the back porch he noticed a rooster having some trouble with the catfish innards, and when the fisherman investigated he found a sizable but battered and discolored pearl. He called Peacock, who bought it for one hundred and fifty dollars. Peacock peeled off the outer "skin" of the pearl and found one of the rarest gems of his

\textsuperscript{48}\textit{Reminiscences of John Peacock, op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{49}\textit{Ibid.} \quad \textsuperscript{50}\textit{Ibid.}
career: a pearl of a deep, pigeon-blood red.  

From 1890 to 1920 the enchanting colors of Wisconsin fresh-water pearls captured world attention and contributed to a thriving market. However the sales of both foreign and American wild pearls were doomed by the Japanese cultured pearl industry, started by a talented Japanese scientist named Kokicha Mikimoto. Just before the turn of the century, Mikimoto developed cultured pearls. His first products lacked quality, but soon they improved to the point of nearly destroying the market for natural types. Eventually the Japanese were able to flood the market and undercut the price of wild pearls.  

As a result of this development, the heyday of the Mississippi River pearl was over by 1920. In 1932 there were only two men still buying gems in Prairie du Chien, John Peacock and F.R. Henzel. They were still able to obtain a few specimens but the business no longer had the exciting, romantic appeal of the earlier days.

51 "Treasure Trove of Mississippi River," op. cit.
52 Reminiscences of John Peacock, op. cit.
CHAPTER IV

THE DECLINE OF CLAMMING AND ITS
REVIVAL IN THE 1960'S

What Happened to the Clamming and Button Industries?

The clamming industry declined after World War I for many reasons. The pressure on the beds was so great that the number of clams that could be taken in a day decreased greatly. In 1916 the federal government began regulating the industry on the river. One measure prohibited the use of power boats in fishing for clams. Also the dams constructed by the federal government to control the depth of the channel, slowed the current and silted over many of the most productive beds.\textsuperscript{54}

Government statistics illustrate the startling decline in the mussels of the upper Mississippi River, particularly in Lake Pepin. In 1914 and 1915 that lake produced three thousand to four thousand tons of commercial shells; in 1929 fewer than one hundred and fifty tons were produced.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} Reminiscences of John Peacock, \textit{op. cit.}
By 1930 the government had closed many of the clamming areas in the hope that eventually, the great store of mussels that once covered the bed of the river would be replenished.\(^{56}\) In the summer of 1933 there were only about two dozen men fishing for clams at York Landing, where there had been as many as three hundred fishing during the best years from 1900 to 1912.\(^ {57}\)

Commercial clamming had all but disappeared by 1940, except for the activities of a few old-timers who still made their living by selling shells. For instance, Alfred Gasperson was still pearl hunting after almost forty years. Of the thousands of people who had made pearl hunting their occupation in the early days, he was one of the few who continued to make this activity his only source of livelihood.\(^ {58}\)

Button cutting in Prairie du Chien also ended with the decline in the supply of clam shells. The Chalmers Button Factory in the Fourth Ward operated until 1933, but most activity by small operators ended earlier.

In its last five or six years of operation the

\(^{56}\)Gregory, op. cit., p. 253.

\(^{57}\)Statement by Roy Harding, Personal Interview, June 14, 1968.

Chalmers concern had to ship in shells from Lake Pepin, and from as far away as Saint Joseph, Missouri. Another problem faced by the button factory in its last years was a shortage of labor. It was difficult to find men who were skilled in operating the cutting machines. Since button cutters were paid on a piece-work basis, only a skilled craftsman could make a good wage.

The Chalmers Company decided that it was no longer profitable to operate a button factory in Prairie du Chien. In 1933 it closed down the plant there and shipped all the equipment to St. Marys, West Virginia where it continued to conduct a business.\textsuperscript{59}

The golden era of pearl buttons existed through the 1920's, and even up to the close of World War II they were still much in demand. Low cost of production was a major factor in the success of the pearl button industry, but it was also cost that finally killed it. Plastic buttons became popular after World War II and ended the era of the pearl button. It costs about five times as much to produce pearl buttons as plastic ones.

Most companies quit making pearl buttons shortly after World War II. The Ronda Button Company of Muscatine,

\textsuperscript{59}Interview with Joe Mara, op. cit.
Iowa, the last to make such items exclusively, discontinued their production in 1966.60

The Revival of Clamming

A drive along the river front in the summer of 1966 brought back memories of an earlier era to many older Prairie du Chien residents. Workers were loading huge piles of clam shells into boxcars for shipment. Steam from the cookers was rising as clams were boiled to separate the meat from the shells. A clammer's boat drifted lazily downstream. This scene could just as well have depicted a summer in 1900 or 1910. The only real difference is that the shells were being shipped to Japan to be used in the cultured pearl industry instead of to the button factories of earlier times.

The same Japanese cultured pearl industry that caused the end of the pearling industry in Prairie du Chien, was responsible for the revival of clamming. It all started in the 1950's when a syndicate called Pearls Propriety Ltd., began using the giant Australian silver lip oyster to produce cultured pearls. The pearlers inserted special beads of shell cut from big Mississippi River "pigtoe" mussels into the big shells, then grafted in pieces of oyster

---

60 "The Passing of an Era in Muscatine," Picture Section, Des Moines Register, Sunday August 7, 1966.
flesh that were already exuding pearl-forming nacre.

The first crop was harvested in June 1958, and the results were staggering. Thousands of big beautiful pearls were produced, the largest being nine-tenths of an inch in diameter and worth four thousand nine hundred dollars.

Other companies began using the fresh-water mussels when they saw the excellent results. They found that better pearls could be produced in a shorter period of time when the oysters were seeded with beads cut from fresh-water clams. 61

This new use for Mississippi River shells brought clamming back to Prairie du Chien as a major industry. As the demand for clam shells increased, the search for productive beds moved north along the Mississippi, and Prairie du Chien again became a center of clamming.

In 1964 the Tennessee Shell Company, the first of four enterprises, set up branch operations in Prairie du Chien. The owners furnished clamming boats to fishermen, and bought shells from them for about forty dollars a ton. In 1965 a second concern, the Borden Shell Company, owned by Ronald Lessard whose father was in the shell business

before him, became active. 62

In 1966 the Automatic Button Company of Muscatine, Iowa, and the Wisconsin Shell Company, owned locally, began buying clams. The price of shells increased to fifty dollars a ton for unprocessed clams, and to eighty dollars a ton for washed clams with the meat and muscle boiled out. Most clammers sold their shells unprocessed, for they lost much of their weight when the meat was removed. 63

The methods of clamming changed little over the years. Modern clammers used basically the same equipment that was used during the early days. The boats were a little longer and some used power rather than manually operated winches to haul up the crowbars, onto which the clam hooks were attached. A picture of a clamming boat drifting down the river in 1966, could just as well have been taken in 1900. 64

The only new method employed was the use of diving rigs. The operator would dive for the clams, using an air compressor that pumped air through a long hose into his

62 Information from Ronald Lessard, Owner of Borden Shell Co., Personal interview, June 27, 1968.
64 Lessard, op. cit.
face mask. With this equipment he could stay under water up to forty-five minutes. The clammer would fill a bucket with clams which lay on the bottom, surface to empty them into a flat bottomed boat, then go down for more. Diving for clams worked well in shallow water, while the old-fashioned "John boats" served best in deep water. 65

Clamming activities were concentrated between Prairie du Chien and LaCrosse, Wisconsin. Most of the diving rigs operated in the LaCrosse area, while the boats were used around Prairie du Chien. Because the clam beds had not been worked for about thirty years, it was possible for a fisherman or diver to get as much as a ton of mussels in one day. At the price of fifty dollars a ton, this was very profitable business for the clammers. 66

In 1966 the Tennessee Shell Company operated eighteen boats and thirty-three diving rigs, Borden Shell had fourteen boats and fifteen diving rigs, and Automatic Button Company operated five boats. The Wisconsin Shell Company bought shells from independent clammers who operated their own boats. During the good years of 1965 and 1966, Borden alone bought between three hundred and three hundred and fifty tons of shells each summer. 67

65 Mullen, op. cit. 66 Lessard, op. cit. 67 Ibid.
Since most of the clams were bought unprocessed, each shell company had to operate a cooker and separator to remove the meat from the shells before they could be shipped. The workers would boil the clams in a big vat until they opened, and then shovel them into an automatic separator where the meat was removed. The meat was used for fish bait, made into hog feed, or thrown away. The shells were loaded into boxcars to begin the long journey to the pearl beds of Japan and Australia. 68

Although pearl-hunting was no longer a major part of the industry, operators still found a few pearls and many slugs. Mrs. Ronald Lessard of the Borden Shell Company would sort through the clam meats, after they had been separated from the shells, in search of pearls. According to Mrs. Lessard, the pearls she found were not of great value, although she was offered one hundred and fifty dollars for one particularly fine gem. This same pearl would have brought the finder close to one thousand dollars in 1900. 69

The boom in the clamming industry lasted through the summer of 1966, when over six hundred tons of shells were shipped out of Prairie du Chien. Then almost without warning, the clam boats all but disappeared from the river around

68 Ibid. 69 Ibid.
that town in June 1967. The only company still operating from there was Borden Shell. It continued to buy shells on a limited basis throughout the summer of 1967. A slowdown in the Japanese market led to this latest reduction in clamming. Two companies reported that a poor season for oysters, due to cold weather in Japan, affected the market and that the slowdown was only temporary. 70

Ronald Lessard of the Borden Shell Company declares that the Japanese have stockpiled a large amount of shells and it is just a matter of time before the market is restored. No clamming operations were planned for 1968, but Lessard plans to clam again in 1969. He predicts that clamming will continue in Prairie du Chien for many years, because the Mississippi is the only river that has enough shells to supply the demands of the Japanese market. 71

More clamming will probably be done around Prairie du Chien in the future, but it is not likely that the industry will ever reach major proportions again. A Wisconsin Conservation Department survey has found that clam populations are rather sparse above Prairie du Chien and that silt

70 "Mississippi Clamming Slackens," The LaCrosse Tribune, June 24, 1967.

71 Lessard, op. cit.
deposits have smothered many formerly productive beds. Also, shells from the Mississippi are not of the quality necessary for use in pearl culture.\textsuperscript{72}

Regardless of what the future holds for the clamming industry, it will be remembered as a very important part of the life of many residents of this river town. Thousands of people made their living from the clamming and pearling industries. It is certainly one of the most colorful chapters in the long history of Prairie du Chien.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. BOOKS


A good account of the clamming and button industry up to 1918, including types of mussels, methods of fishing, and button manufacturing.


This book has a short section that tells of the importance of the clamming industry to Prairie du Chien.

B. PERIODICALS


This article provides information about the pearl buyers who operated out of Prairie du Chien.

"Pearls From Silver Lips; Australia's Kuri Bay," *Time*, LXXIV (November 23, 1959), pp. 96+

Tells of the first use of beads from fresh-water clams to produce pearls in oysters.


An account of the early button industry in Muscatine, Iowa, and its founder J.F. Boepple.

C. NEWSPAPERS


Various articles telling about pearls that were found, as well as information on clamming. The issues from 1900 to 1905 are particularly helpful.


The centennial edition of the *Courier* containing several articles on early clamming and pearling.
A special article on the revival of the clamming industry in Prairie du Chien.

A good article on the reasons for the decline of clamming on the Mississippi.

Milwaukee Journal, July 16, 1939.
Gives reasons for the disappearance of clamming in 1930's and tells about one of the last men to make pearl hunting his sole occupation.

Gives reasons for the disappearance of clamming in 1967.

Tells of new methods for gathering clams.

"The passing of an Era in Muscatine," Picture Section Des Moines Register, Des Moines, Iowa, August 7, 1966.
Tells about the end of the pearl button industry in Muscatine.

Particularly helpful in describing the different types of pearls that come from the various types of shells.

C. INTERVIEWS

Mr. Cornelius worked at the old button factory on the corner of Main and Bluff Streets and was helpful in supplying information on this phase of the industry.

Louis Favre, January 8, 1956, by M.J. Dyrud.
The notes from this interview were used by permission of Mr. Dyrud. Favre gives a lot of information on early button cutting operations in Prairie du Chien.
Louis and Ernie Favre, December 31, 1956, by M.J. Dyrud.

Notes from this interview were use by permission of Mr. Dyrud. Both Ernie and Louis were involved in some of the earliest clamming operations in Prairie du Chien, and operated a button cutting factory. Very good for information on the beginning of clamming.

Roy Harding, June 14, 1968.

Mr. Harding was a button cutter at the Chalmers factory from 1913 to 1915. He also did some clamming in the early thirties.

Ronald Lessard, June 27, 1968.

Ronald Lessard is the owner of Borden Shell Company. He was able to supply information on the revival of clamming and the future prospects of the industry.

Joe Mara, June 14, 1968.

Mara was a button cutter from 1903 to 1933. He was foreman of the Chalmers plant for the last six years of its operation.

Merlin May, June 20, 1968.

He was the local representative for the Automatic Button Company when they were buying clams in Prairie du Chien.

"Reminiscences of John Peacock," Tape Recorded Interview, on file at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

In this recording Mr. Peacock tells about his activities as a pearl buyer for over fifty years. It was very helpful in telling the story of pearling in Prairie du Chien.