

Romantic Story of the American Pearl

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SEVERAL weeks ago a New York pearl dealer sold a lot of domestic pearls to a Frenchman in Paris. The Parisian did not even take the trouble to ship them on to India, but after drilling them in the French capital invoiced them to a firm of American jewelers as Oriental pearls. When the man who had sold them to the Frenchman returned to New York a few days ago he found the gems on exhibition in a New York showcase. He recognized them immediately as the ones he had sold to his French customer and for the fun of the thing he thought he would inquire about the price.

"We are asking \$75,000 for them," replied the jeweler. "They are genuine Orientals and we ought to get a little more, seeing that the price of pearls is going up."

"Wait a minute," said the expert. "Please turn that pearl over. Now look. Just at the edge of the hole where the gem is drilled you will find a dark colored spot. See it? Looks as if the skin had been bruised and had healed."

The jeweler looked, screwing his "loup" up to his eye and taking a careful squint.

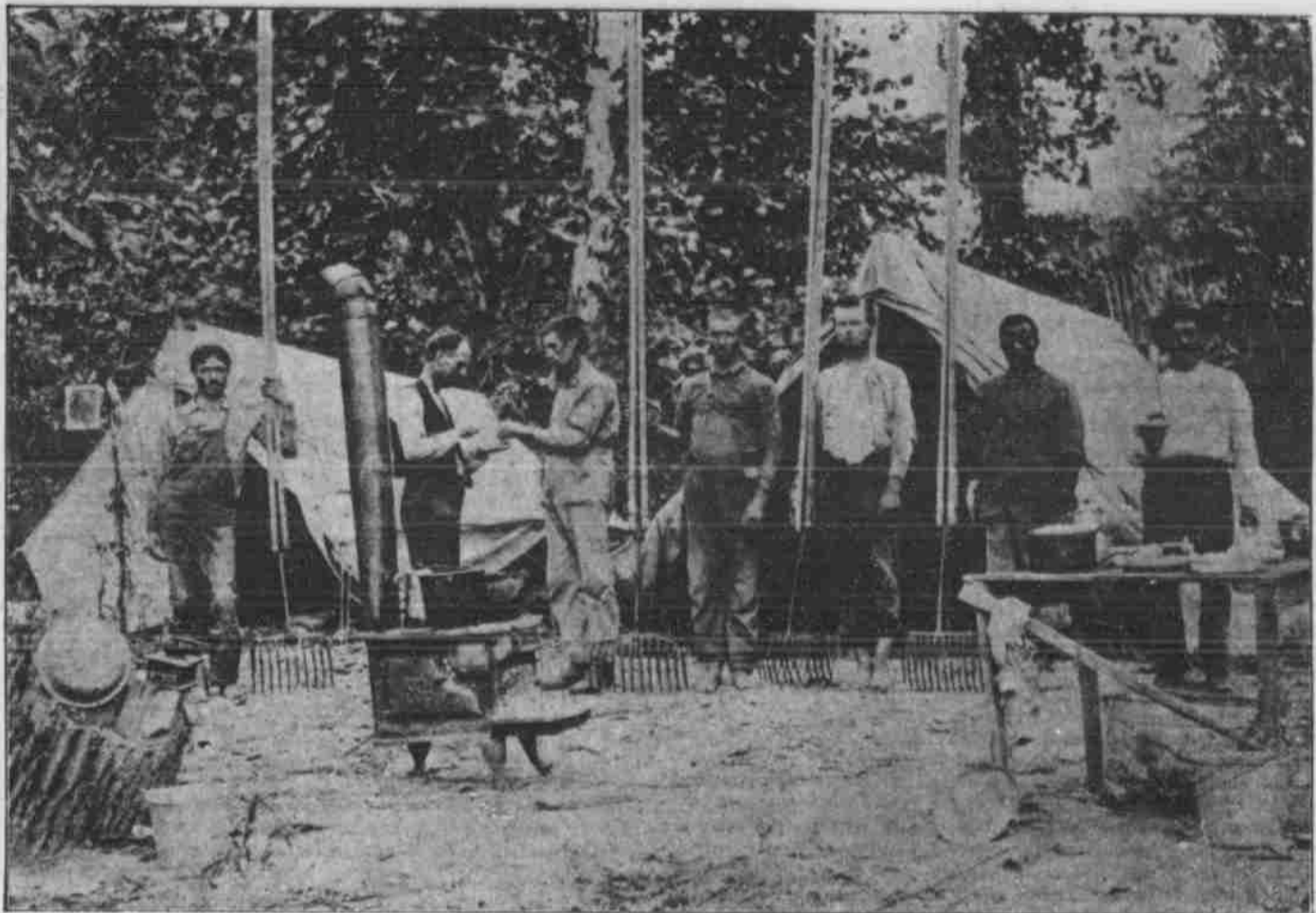
"That's right," he said finally. Then he snatched away his "loup" and gazed at the dealer. "Say," he asked, looking at the expert sharply and hugging the pearl tight, "who are you?"

"Tell you later; let's talk about those pearls. They are interesting to me. I used to own them once. I bought them out in Newport, Arkansas, when they hadn't been out of the water more than fifteen minutes. They cost me less than \$10,000. I sold them in Paris for \$35,000. They cost you about \$50,000. I could have sold them to you for \$15,000. Now, here's my name; here are some pearls, domestic ones like yours. Want to buy?"

The jeweler almost fell over at the first revelation, but the second rallied him.

"No," he said rigidly, "we don't want to handle any domestic pearls. It will spoil our trade and reputation."

It is doubtful whether this or any other jeweler will be able much longer to handle domestic pearls as Oriental jewels and thereby secure big profits, for the simple reason that the pearl-bearing clams are disappearing from the bottom of the Mississippi river and its tributaries at a rate that threatens total extinction of the species in a very short time. Many of the most productive rivers of the pearling sections have been swept clean of the pearl makers and unless something is done soon a business that is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to the people of



IN A PEARLERS' CAMP.

numerous pearl button factories along the river in this vicinity. The pearl button, oil and fertilizing industries have been as largely responsible for the declination of the pearl-bearing clam beds as the pearl hunters and both have decorated the shores of the Mississippi from La Crosse, Wis., to New Orleans with evidences of their ravages.

The pearling fever started in the summer of 1900. An old sunburnt fisherman was the cause of it. He was fishing from a skiff anchored in the middle of the Black river; his bait ran out and he wanted some more. The easiest way to get it was to rake up a clam from the bottom of the stream, about eight feet below the surface of the water. The bivalve that he brought up was an in-

report of the find spread far and wide, and the inhabitants of that section, including the fisherman, rushed at the sand beds at the bottom of the Black river with all kinds of implements, from pitchforks to scow dredges, and piled the river banks with clams for miles up and down the stream. The jeweler who had purchased the pearl from the fisherman sold it in New York for \$2,000, which was more than he had made in his little store in three years.

The excitement was intense in Arkansas, and in a comparatively short time every inhabitant in the vicinity of the Black river, both old and young, male and female, were delving for clams and pearls. Laborers left the farms, clerks and business men turned fortune seekers, and even society women

found a pearl which made him as much of a capitalist as the man who bought the buggy.

A family of negroes that lived in a hut, and went partially unclothed all the year round, became wealthy, built a palace of a home, and hired white men for servants. Not one in the family could read or write, yet they bought automobiles, steam launches and horses.

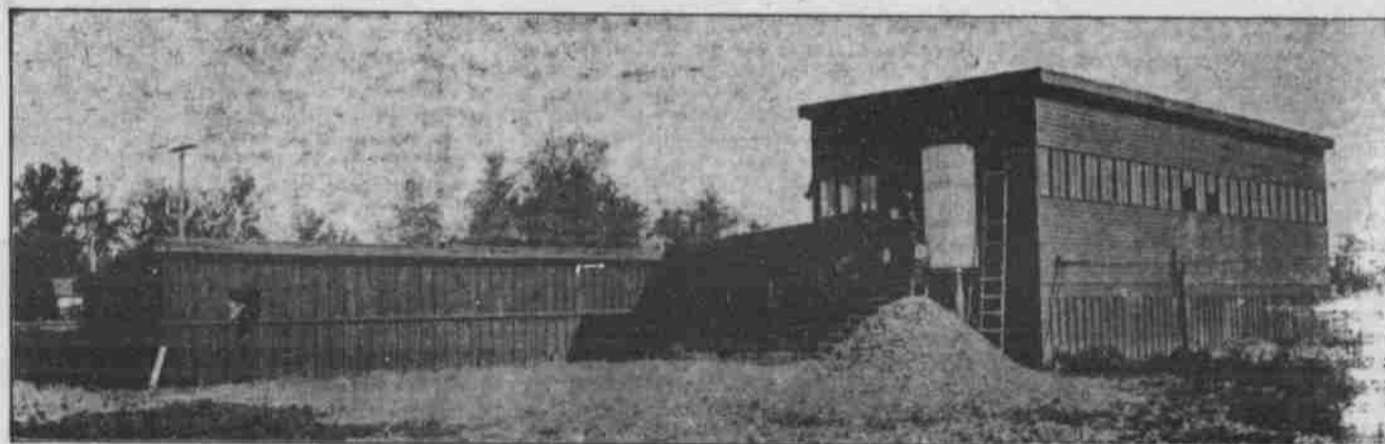
Boys to whom 50 cents was wealth enough for a week of national holidays, started bank accounts and amassed comfortable fortunes, and many a poor youth in a few weeks got enough pearls to secure to him the college education he had been forced to forego.

The excitement spread from the land to the river steamboats. Their crews deserted them, and sometimes their captains, and the Black river was the scene of the wildest excitement. New towns were built and old ones were increased to the size of cities. Streets were laid out, banks and mercantile establishments were started, mortgages were lifted, money was plenty and times were prosperous. The section sprang into prominence, both financially and socially, in the state, and New York pearl dealers flocked there in great numbers, and soon the pearl market centers of the United States and Europe were flooded with American pearls. This was at a time when oriental pearls were scarce, and when the demand for them was constantly on the jump. European pearl dealers began to open their eyes to the beauty, size and quantity of the domestic gems.

The excitement in the pearling section continued throughout the summers of 1900 and 1901, and only subsided when the Black river was cleaned of pearls. Then the fortune seekers swarmed out to the Mississippi river and explored the streams, creeks and bayous of Arkansas. No rich fishing was struck, however, until White river was reached. Here the scenes on the Black river were enacted.

The Mississippi has always been lazy in the matter of dispensing pearls, and although they have been found there for the past half a century, hardly ever has there been any great pearling excitement. With the new impetus, however, given that industry by the pearl fisheries of Arkansas, more Mississippi gems were brought to light. Because of its size, the

(Continued on Page Fifteen.)



A TYPICAL PEARL BUTTON FACTORY.

those sections will pass away as quickly as it came. And in this conjunction it is interesting to note that the pearl oysters of Ceylon are now so scarce that the government is soon to put in force a law which will prohibit all pearl fishing for a period of five years.

Within the past three years more than \$3,000,000 worth of pearls have been taken from the waters of the Mississippi valley. At least three-fourths of the pearls have come from the Black and White rivers of Arkansas. In 1901 about \$1,500,000 worth of the gems were taken from the Black river alone, most of which came from a section not twenty miles long, with Newport as its center. Last year less than \$1,000,000 worth were taken and this season the output has fallen off more than 50 per cent. The Black river has been entirely cleaned out and the swarms of fortune hunters has gone over to the White river, a few miles distant, and that, too, has given up nearly all its wealth.

When this river has been depleted the largest pearling region in the middle west will become what it originally was—an unpopulated wilderness. Already thousands of people have left and Newport and other towns which sprang up in a night are rapidly dwindling. In Newport more business houses and dwellings are vacant than are occupied; its population has fallen within a little more than a year from 15,000 to 4,000.

The other important domestic pearl center is on the Mississippi itself, around Prairie Du Chien, Wis., but it does not compare with the southern beds and fishing for pearls there is more of a side line to the industry of obtaining shells for the

noctent-looking specimen, and there was nothing in its appearance that foreshadowed the great excitement to come. The fisherman, whistling a little tune, inserted his knife blade between the shells and pried them apart. As he did so a beautiful, round, lustrous pearl dropped out on the thwart of the skiff and rolled to the bottom of the craft, where it lay glistening in the forenoon sun.

The fisherman sat blinking at it for a full minute, then made a dive for it, and worked harder than he ever had before in his life to get to shore on the double quick. He sold the pearl to a local jeweler for \$100 and retired to private life. His retirement, however, lasted less than a week, for the

went down to the shores of the stream and waded into the water, searching for pearl-bearing clams.

An old negro by the name of Nelse Parks found a clam which netted him something over \$500. With the proceeds Nelse purchased a fine buggy. Before he could buy a horse a circus came to town, and when it left, the balance of Nelse's bank account went with it, so that he was compelled to sell his buggy without taking a ride in it.

A farmer who was driving home with a wagon load of clams was attacked by a dog. He threw a couple of bivalves at the dog. The owner of the dog picked up the shells, opened them, and in one of them



PEARL DREDGES AND DREDGERS.