

THE MUSSLER

By John F. Hall

William Shakespeare wrote, "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players." The meaning of of this phrase is that this world is like a stage show, and all human beings are merely actors. I played many roles in my life time, but the role of mussler was unique. The challenge in writing this had to do with making a story about a lowly clam (freshwater mussel) interesting. So I put in some international intrigue with Japan. Thankfully, I saved some pictures of the mussel boats that my son and I built. Most people think of a mussel as merely a clam that lives in the mud floor of streams, rivers and lakes. I was on a tarmac in a plane that was refueling in Japan many decades ago. I could only observe Japan from the plane's window. I never dreamed that one day I would be trying to buy some specialized equipment from Japan.

My son, John, decided that he could make more money mussel fishing than he could as a professional fishing guide. One large mussel shell called



was called a washboard could be sold for ten dollars. So we built two mussel-ling boats. The first was made from a flat wooden John-boat. The second was constructed on top of a pontoon boat.

My son is an excellent welder and he built the two long metal crowfoot bars for this boat. We purchased the crowfoot hooks from the mussel shell buyers that purchased our mussel shells. The pontoon mussel boat was powered by a 60-horse Mercury outboard motor. This boat had a two-seat, padded seat in the bridge. It was equipped with two depth finders, a small black & white 12 volt television and a marine band radio that allowed us to talk to the U.S. Coast Guard. The television was used for weather reports and lake level height and water temperature put out by WPSD TV, Channel 6. The boat had a small infrared propane heater that kept us warm in the winter months. The cost of a yearly license to harvest mussels, from the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife was \$300.

We learned how to harvest mussels from talking to and watching other musslers at work. We used an old garden tiller to raise the very heavy crowfoot bar, one at a time. Two people are needed to work the pontoon mussel boat. Once the meat crowfoot bar up, we used a round device to measure the size of the mussel shell. If the mussel was too small, we put it back into the water. We used a crowfoot tool to turn up the the four crowfoot wires on each of the crowfoot hooks. At the end of each wires is a small rounded metal ball that the mussels grabs onto when the crowfoot hooks touches the open shell.

The Japanese needed American mussel shells to make pearl nuclei that is put into oysters that make cultured pearls. They cut the mussel shell into cubes. The cubes are put into a machine that tumbles and pressure-grinds them into small nuclei balls. Then they insert the ball nuclei into salt-water oysters. Within a year the oysters secrete a thin layer of nacre around the mussel nuclei to create a cultured pearl.

My oldest granddaughter, Andrea, gave me a Christmas present. It was a book about pearls. That book peaked my interest into considering to start a small pearl farm on Lake Barkley. I planned to put mussels with nuclei in cages under my friends boat docks. The brick wall that I ran into was Japan. This country has a world monopoly on the machine



and special tools that I needed. They did not want any competition out of little old me. They would not sell me this proprietary equipment. They only wanted the mussel shells that my son and I were harvesting on Lake Barkley and Kentucky Lake. The largest mussel shell

buying and shell exporting company in the United States is the Tennessee Shell Company in Camden, Tennessee. This company sets shell prices. This company is owned by the Japanese.

The Historian and Moralist, simply known as Lord Acton, expressed his opinion about people that have too much power. In an 1887 letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, he wrote, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The Japanese were not just satisfied with having a complete monopoly over the machine and special tools to make nuclei, and setting the price of lawful mussel shells, they began to knowingly purchase mussel shells from streams and rivers that were off limits and contained types of mussels that ere on the endangered species list.

Sometimes in life it seems like Mother Nature gets involves in things. In 1994, something had been killing off oysters in Ago Bay, the heart of Japan's cultured-pearl business and else where in that country. Experts attributed the initial oyster deaths to "Red Tide," a bloom of microscopic, toxin-producing animals in the ocean that proved deadly to the oysters.

In July 24, 1998, the largest shell buying/exporting company in the United States and a subsidiary of Kogen Trading Company, Ltd, of Tokyo, Japan, the Tennessee Shell Company (TSC) pled guilty to one felony Lacey Act count. The TSC paid one million dollars in restitution for illegally buying and transporting overseas thousands of pounds of freshwater mussels, one of the most valuable and least understood wildlife resources. According to Veronica F. Coleman, United States Attorney, The TSC purchased the large and valuable mussels from independent buyers and divers with full knowledge that they had been taken from waters where state law prohibited their harvest. She stated, "What this case boils down to is the plundering of America's wildlife for profit."

My son and I were musselers for about two years. Unlawful divers would watch where we had luck finding good mussel beds. They would raid these beds at night and greatly reduce our harvest. The demand for mussel shells, due to the Red Tide in Japan, nearly evaporated the demand for mussel shells and the prices for shells went flat. First, the shell buyers went out of business. Then we followed. The platoon mussel boat was disassembled and sold for scrap to Green Earth scrap yard in Hopkinsville.

We had good memories brailing on Lake Barkley and Kentucky Lake. Steering the boat, checking the water depth, controlling the boat's speed. Lowering and raising the crowhook bar, taking the large "Wash Board" mussels off the crow hook and knowing that one large mussel would sell for \$10.00, made it more like a treasure hunt. We had to watch for floating debris and wild boaters and large barges. Storms would come up fast and we had to head towards the bays for safety. Brailing in the winter months was a challenge only when we had to leave the heated cabin. Many times, the Good Lord gave us a bountiful harvest of shells.

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*Read more stories written by John F. Hall at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>