

WHEN PEARLS GREW BIG IN TENNESSEE
By Hugh Walker
The Nashville Tennessean Magazine, 1 March 1964

It was a good day for fishing, back in 1881, or maybe it was '82, when two Murfreesboro boys wet their lines in the Caney Fork River. Theirs was a strange catch.

The boys were Charles Bradford and James Johnson. At the mouth of Indian Creek they waded into the shallow stream and pulled up some mussels for bait. One of the boys opened a mussel shell and – so an old newspaper account says – a beautiful white pearl rolled out.

Old-time pearling men say it's not that easy – the pearl is always under the skin. But at any rate the boys had a pearl, a real “curiosity.” They took it to Murfreesboro and turned it over to William Wendel, a druggist.

The druggist sent the pearl to Tiffany's in New York, and a few days later the boys had a check for \$83. In those days that was quite a sum. And so was started the colorful era of “pearling” on Middle Tennessee streams – an exciting time that was to last until World War I.

On the Upper Cumberland and the Caney Fork conditions were changed by the building of the dams which slowed the current and covered bars with deep water. The mussels thrived in shoals and shallow places where fast moving water brought them a constant food supply. In mud and sand they could “walk” on the bottom, moving slowly on a tough little “foot” which extended from the partly open shell.

With the deepening of the channels the little bivalves (they are of the genus *Unio*) lost their swift-running shoals. Many could no longer survive. In deep water they were less available to amateur pearlmen who lacked special equipment, and conditions were apparently less favorable for producing pearls.

THE BUILDING of the Great Falls Dam on the Caney Fork came along with the first world war upsetting the living conditions of both mussels and people. At Carthage, *Courier* editor Sam Neal remembers that some pearls were found in the early Twenties, but says no fine pearls were reported there after the war.

“This is partly due to the rising cost of labor,” Sam says. “I'm convinced there are still some pearl-bearing mussels in the rivers, but there's too much labor involved to make it worthwhile looking for them.”

In Stone's River there are mussels to be found – no dams have been built yet on this tributary of the Cumberland. Albert Canler Sr., who owns a camp on the stream, has a large collection of shells of various types, but says he never found a pearl. Canler thinks the pearl-armored mussels will disappear completely after the Percy Priest dam is built.

What was it like in the old days when pearlmen by the hundreds armed themselves with broken case knives and waded into the streams? There are still some ex-pearlmen around. And accounts in print tell of exciting times hunting the lustrous spheres.

In 1880 an old-time pearlman named J. L. Smith moved in Nashville from Murfreesboro. He told a reporter for the *American* that the Caney Fork find had been the talk of the town in Murfreesboro causing a mad rush to the creeks and rivers. The reporter wrote that thousands “nay millions of the quiet bivalves” were pulled up from their beds of mud and sand, and split open in the search for pearls. Now and then a pearl appeared and the hunt went on.

The branches of Stone's River below Murfreesboro had been “made barren” of mussels, Smith reported, though others appeared there in later years. Above Murfreesboro, he added, the pearls were worthless. Caney Fork, he said, was “about worked out,” and the search was still going on.

PERHAPS THE most appealing account of a Tennessee pearl hunt ever written appeared in the New Yorker magazine of July 28, 1951. It was written by the Lebanon novelist Bowen Ingram, and in it she told of her experience as a child on the Caney Fork where she pulled up mussels on a bar to make a longed-for necklace of seed pearls.

Bowen (Mars. Dan) Ingram has that necklace today – and there are other possessors of Caney Fork and Cumberland River pearls. Not all were sold – and perhaps dozens are being worn today in rings and necklaces by Tennessee women.

Mrs. Ingram's father Austin Prewett lived in Gordonsville where he "dabbed" in pearls and farming in the placid years before World War I, splashing in his Marathon automobile across the shallow Caney Fork. He bought pearls and sold them to Black Starr & Frost in New York and kept some for his daughter. And just four years ago, when his grandson Dan Ingram Jr. was married, his bride wore a ring made by jewelry designer John Frase of Nashville – set with three lustrous pearls from the Caney Fork.

One of the most famous mussel beds and pearling grounds was below Carthage on the Cumberland. Five miles below the town, near Taylor's Landing was Roland's Towhead (island) and a big bar, where mussels thrived. Here, so far as we know was held the only "public pearling" in the history of Middle Tennessee.

Sam Key of Carthage, a son of pearl buyer T. O. Key, says he attended this affair, held at Rolands' Towhead about 1906. It was a fine Sunday, he relates, with about 50 couples on hand. Everybody got excited when one swain having found a small pearl hid it in a mussel his sweetheart was opening. The girl almost fainted for joy when the pearl rolled out. A sudden storm, Sam recalls, flooded the river and drove the pearlers home.

Overton A. High, 90, known to his friends as Obe, was an ambitious pearler on the Upper Cumberland around Carthage in the days before Lock 7 covered the shallow places. He lives between Carthage and Dixon Springs.

High remembers when John Bowman and Al Napier found \$200 worth of pearls in less than a week and Bowman bought a 15-acre "hill farm" with his share of the money. That was back in '97. High listed the types of mussels found in those days as Heel Splitters or Bull Heads, Ladies Pocketbooks (good pearlers) and Pinks. He recalled a mussel bed above Rome about a mile long where many tons of mussels were found.

Owners of pearl necklaces still follow some old advice. If you own pearls, wear them. Pearls contain a small amount of water and if they are worn and allowed to show their luster they look forever young. But pearls hidden in a vault, so it is could, will lose their life and lustrous beauty.

It was not unusual for pearl buyers to peel a dull pearl like an onion removing layers until the luster was restored. "I saw my father peel a big pearl," Sam Key said. "He sold it to a fellow who kept it in a glass of water, but the pearl died anyways." Carmack Key, Sam's brother has a delicate scale which his father used to weigh pearls.

Today Mrs. Edward M. Turner of Carthage related by marriage to the Myer family wears Cumberland River pearls from the Myer collection. Her rings are set with lustrous white pearls as large as English peas.

The "rosebuds" or pink pearls are still noted for their beauty. A fine example is one owned and worn today by Mrs. Stanley Horn Jr. of Brentwood, the granddaughter of Marvin Ford, a noted pearl buyer who lived at Elmwood, near Carthage.

Mrs. Horn remembers that her grandfather dealt in pearls at McMinnville, and that he went to New York twice a year to sell them to Tiffany's. Ford once paid \$2,000 for a river pearl – perhaps the highest price ever paid in Tennessee. He later sold it to Mrs. Nicholas Roosevelt Longworth, daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt.

Many a pearl buyer gave his children a tobacco sack full of “slugs” or misshapen pearls, some lustrous and iridescent. These were worthless in those days – but they may not be worthless now.

Walter Sharp, former chairman of the fine arts department at Vanderbilt University reports that beautiful and valuable jewelry is now being made in Italy from gold worked around misshapen pearls – and in fact beautiful things have been made from these “baroque” or imperfect pearls since the days of Benvenuto Cellini, the great Italian artisan, who used them himself.

“It is quite likely,” said Sharp, “that developing tastes in this country may now encompass these formerly disregarded pearls – or “slugs” as the old pearlmen called them – and they will yet be of real value.”

MUSSELS are still being taken in large quantities from the Tennessee River. And mussel boats equipped with “mules” (underwater stalls) and “brails” (rakes) for bringing up the bivalves have been operating on the Cumberland just above Nashville.

John Conder, supervisor of commercial fishing for the Tennessee Game and fish Commission reports that Japanese demand for Tennessee shells has brought about renewed activity in musseling, and many tons of the shells are being shipped to Kobe, Japan, with some low-grade pearls being found in the process.

The Japanese make small pellets from these shells and insert them under the skins of “mantles” of live oysters, who proceed to cover the pellet with layers of nacre. In due time the oyster is opened and a lustrous “cultured” pearl is removed – a pearl born from a Tennessee mussel shell. The chances are good that it will be sold in the United States.

The Japanese also make pearl buttons from mussel shells although modern plastics have hurt this business. One pearl button factory still operating in this area is Weber & Sons Button Co. at Savannah, a Tennessee River town where hundreds of driveways are paved with broken mussel shells.

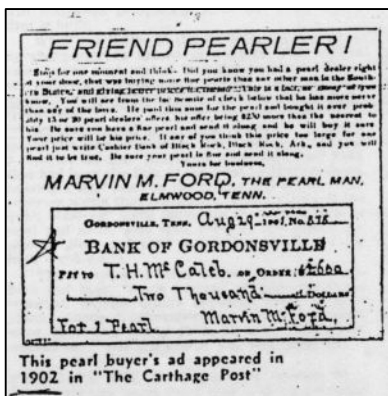
Shell buyer Louis Weber reports that mussel diggers on the Tennessee still find some pearls when cooking the meat from the shells. Most of these are low grade slugs which bring about six dollars an ounce, but once in a while a biscuit shaped pearl will turn up worth \$25 to \$50.

Weber believes the disappearance of fine pearls from the Tennessee is more due to the great amount of digging than to current or stream changes. So many mussels are taken, he says, that they don’t have time to produce good pearls. The present mussel harvest produces smaller, younger shells.

Prehistoric Indians of Middle Tennessee ate millions of mussels and shells are found in heaps around their towns. But the meat of Tennessee varieties is tough and never referred to as the “succulent bivalve.”

The shallow waters and bars are almost gone now, and perhaps never again will lustrous pearls be taken from Tennessee mussels. But the fortunate owners of these beauties have mementoes of exciting treasure hunts on Tennessee rivers.

And Carmack Key says there is a lady in Smith County – he won’t tell her full name – whose given name is Cumberland River Pearl.



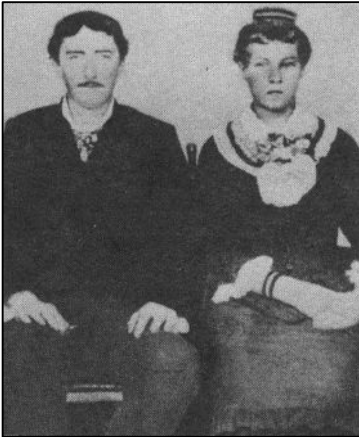
This pearl buyer’s ad appeared in 1902 in “The Carthage Post”

Marvin M. Ford, The Pearl Man, Elmwood, TN.

My cousin Miriam (Shanks) Gwaltney grew up in the Buffalo Valley, Putnam Co., TN area and remembers as a young girl going swimming and pearling in the Caney Fork River under the railroad bridge in Buffalo Valley looking for mussels that might contain a pearl. Her Aunt Alice Gertrude “Gertie” Boyd Harris had a pearl ring with a pearl from the Caney Fork River. Aunt Gertie’s ring went to Kathleen Burch Craun because Kathleen’s father, Grover Cleveland “Cleve” Burch was the one who found the pearl.

Grover Cleveland “Cleve” Burch and Georgia Kerr Boyd, sister of Alice Gertrude Boyd Harris.

Source: Sifting From Putnam County Tennessee by Mary Hopson, pg. 145



Abraham Lincoln Smith, 1860-1943, and wife Laura Ann Harris, 1866 – 1962. Abe’s parents were Jonathan “Jack” Smith born around 1803 and died about 1862, and Sarah Elizabeth Garner, 1828. They were married in DeKalb County, TN in 1850. “Abe” had three brothers Jonathan M. Smith, born 1855; Reuben A. Smith, born 1858; and Jackson Smith, born 1864. Laura had a sister Mary E. Harris Gibson, and a brother, Byrd S. Harris. “Abe”, Laura and Byrd are all buried in the Ashburn Cemetery in Silver Point, TN. “Abe” and Laura had the following children: Ocea Lavada Smith, 1883 – 1984, married (1) William Samuel Johnson, 1884 – 1971, and (2) Clyde Meyers; Claude Lincoln Smith, 1885 – 1981, married (1) Theopolie Herd, and (2) Olive Meyers; Ethel Mai Smith, 1887 – 1973, married Alfred T. Puckett; Byrd Otis Smith, 1891 – 1981, married Nell Craven; Ruby Ila Smith, 1894 – 1957, married Silas Roy McGee; Noble Hadley Smith, 1898 – 1953, married Dorothy Duckworth; Mary Dee Smith, 1900 – 1938,

married (1) George Frazier, and (2) Robert J. Huckles; Willie Smith, 1904 died young; Nell Smith, 1907; Chelsia Smith, 1911, died young. The family relates that “Abe” was an excellent swimmer and taught others to swim. When someone drowned in the Caney Fork River, he would dive and try to retrieve the body. He worked the mussel beds of the Caney Fork, diving from a canoe, trying to find mussels that would contain pearls. When his daughter Nell was 16 years old he gave her a “Rose Bud” pearl ring which she still has. He also gave pearls to his sisters. It is believed that he sold some of his pearls for as much as \$100.00. He purchased land from “Bee” Christian in Silver Point from the sale of pearls. The Rose Garden Restaurant and a service station now occupy part of the land where “Abe” and Laura raised their family. Courtesy Norman T. McGee, Sr. , 6201 Patton Road, Arrington, TN. 37014.

Source: Cemeteries of DeKalb Co., Tennessee by Doris Garrison Gilbert, pg. 68

Abe Lincoln Smith, b. 12 November 1860 – d. 2 February 1943

Laura Ann (Harris) Smith, b. 29 January 1866 – d. 15 March 1962

Byrd S. Harris, b. 24 December 1871 – d. 25 January 1956

Source: Carthage – Smith County, TN Newspapers, Vol. 2: 1808 – 1817 & 1913 – 08 June 1916, Transcribed by Betty C. Meadows Scott,

Pg. 26: Carthage Courier – 21 August 1913: Lancaster Column: **Oscar Williams found a 40 gr. Pearl in Caney Fork River Friday. Some say it is worth six of eight hundred dollars.**

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