

# THE PALIMPSEST

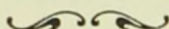
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## Argonauts of the Mississippi

In 1587 seven hundred pounds of pearls worth \$800,000, taken from American waters, escaped the plunder of freebooters and arrived at Seville, Spain. They were destined for the diadems of kings. In the year 1913, the sum of \$1,500,000 was paid for clam shells, the pearls not included. From these shells, buttons were to be made not for the adornment of royalty, but for the use of common man.

A third boom was in store for the Mississippi River when the molluscan wealth on its bed was discovered. In the first heyday of the river, the steamboats on its waters made the boatmen "captains" of industry. Up and down the stream they plied, carrying cargoes of lead, immigrants, and later grain. Steamboat captains with some degree of pride steered their boats past the towns which their trade had helped to create.

Rafting at its height followed in the wake of the steamboat era. The decline began in 1892 and continued until the exhaustion of the timber supply put an end to the business of the Mississippi River Logging Company in 1909, and in the meantime the interest in the Mississippi went deeper — to the very bottoms.

Fifty years had passed since the steamboats had made the river a highway of commerce. Now, early in the nineties, smaller craft — little argonauts — studded the river. The shallow lagoons and sloughs, which in low water had distressed the steamer pilots, were yielding hidden treasures that might not have been displeasing to the heart of Captain Kidd. And if the Captain could have seen no glamour in dirty clam shells, his eye would have lit up to view the lustrous gems of pearl occasionally embedded in the shells.

John F. Boepple was a pirate only in so far as he had a vision of wealth to be found on the bottom of the river. By trade he was a turner and button worker in Ottensen, Germany, near Hamburg. About 1872 a few shells taken from the Illinois River were sent to German button manufacturers. Unlike other craftsmen in his trade, Boepple believed that the manufacture of pearl buttons was not only practicable but had tremendous possibilities. In March, 1887, he arrived in

America, bringing his lathe and trade tools with him.

Having settled on a farm near Petersburg, Illinois, he located a bed of mussels in the Sangamon River. His discovery was quite as accidental as the discovery of gold in California had been. But the clam is neither glittering nor beautiful and, as a source of wealth, it was then in the realm of uncertain potentiality. Though Mr. Boepple continued to work his farm and engage in railroad construction, he kept the Sangamon River clam bed in mind and sought others. One was located in the Rock River near Rock Island, another in the Mississippi near Muscatine, and a third in the Iowa River near Columbus Junction. At the latter place, he established a small shop, a button factory in all but name. It is unlikely that Mr. Boepple had ever heard of the manufacture of pearl buttons from fresh water shells in the American western waters at an earlier date.

The first official record of a button industry in river valleys east of the Mississippi was made in 1802 when Louisiana belonged to France. Under the auspices of the French Minister of the Interior, Dr. F. A. Michaux made an extended tour through the country west of the Alleghany Mountains in the Ohio Valley. He observed that "in the Ohio, as well as in the Alleghany, the Monon-

gahela, and the other rivers of the West, there is found in abundance a species of mussel having a length from 2 to 5 inches. It is not eaten at all, but the nacre, which is thick, is used to make cuff (or sleeve) buttons. I have seen some of them at Lexington, Ky., which were equal in beauty to those used in Europe."

Again, in 1883 at Knoxville, Tennessee, a commercial plant had made a small start. This shop, devoted chiefly to the manufacture of novelties, was discontinued because of the lack of suitable machinery. The next mark of advancement was the operation of pearl-button factories in Cincinnati and Saint Paul during the late eighties. But they imported ocean pearl shells.

Buttons of brass and wood have been made in this country since 1750, metal buttons since 1800, and buttons of horn since 1812. Marine shell buttons were manufactured as early as 1855, and buttons of composition in 1862. And finally, in 1891, the fresh-water pearl-button industry had its real beginning. In that year, Mr. Boepple, noting the rise in price due to the tariff on imported buttons, went to Muscatine, a lumber town at the time, to establish a pearl-button factory.

The horn-button turner from Germany had no capital, only tenacious purpose. He presented himself with a small supply of shells to William P.

Molis, who was superintendent of the water works of Muscatine. Mr. Molis supplied his immediate needs and gave what time and money he had to promote the project. The factory was housed in Davis's cooper shop, then near Cedar and Fourth streets.

Mr. Molis continued to invest in proportion as other citizens failed to support the venture. New York business men were encouraging. Mr. Molis's samples were good specimens, they said, and the thing to do, according to the Eastern wholesaler, was to keep right on and perfect the sample.

From that time it was less difficult to attract interest. Nick, Tom, and Pat Barry participated in a mechanical and financial way. Plumbers by trade, they were inventive and enterprising. Boepple saw his idea develop in their hands, for their automatic machines put the industry on a growing scale. His part in it grew steadily less. Little versed in the methods of business, he was unable to compete with or even assist the men who were establishing factories in a way to meet the requirements of a big business.

There was a rush for clams. Clam scows dotted the river. There was nothing to restrict clamming. It was inexpensive, for a "John boat" with its fishing apparatus could easily be made for \$20

or even less. Besides, the river was long and free. Catching clams had not the temperamental quality of other fishing, but the catch was certain and easy, with little experience required. To be sure, it was not a particularly pleasant occupation, for after a long, tedious day, the sticky pile had yet to be pulled to shore and cleaned before it was ready for sale at an average price of a dollar and a half.

The fisherman's clam scow is a flatboat, usually about eighteen feet long and four feet wide. On each side of it is a pair of upright forked stakes which supports an iron pipe resting horizontally in the forks and parallel to the side of the boat. From these pipes, at intervals of several inches, dangle chains two or three feet long. Attached to these chains are several wire grappling hooks with four flukes, each the size of a large fish hook — "crow feet", they are called.

Like a huge centipede, one of the bars is lowered from the side of the boat into the water by a thick rope, and dragged slowly along the bottom. When this rake comes in contact with the clams they clamp on the hooks and cling there tenaciously. After drifting along for fifty to one hundred feet, the clammer pulls in his haul, a tangle of hooks and clams. When one drag has been restored to its place on the forked sticks, the other is lowered to draw up its booty.

In shallow water, simpler devices such as shell forks and shell tongs were effective for clam fishing. If shells were very abundant in deep water, special power dredges were used to some extent, but they were in general discarded for the simpler crow-foot equipment.

The haul that the fisherman drew up contained an assortment of shells. The "Niggerhead", with its round, flat exterior and the pearly white interior, which produced many blanks capable of a high, lustrous polish, was the luckiest draw. Niggerhead buttons commanded the highest price. On the shore the shells were unloaded — the "Warty Back", the "Yellow Back" (a sand shell, valuable for novelties), the "Mucket", "Washboard", "Pocketbook", "Pig Toe", "Maple Leaf", "Elephant's Ear" — all salable. There was no regular trade channel for the raw material. Manufacturer and fisherman made arrangements directly for the catch of the season, the period roughly from June to October.

The Bureau of the Census in a report on fisheries of the United States in 1908 stated that "in 1894 the industry [clam fishing] was barely started, and the total product was only 196,000 pounds, valued at \$2700. Of this Iowa supplied 148,000 pounds and Illinois the balance." By 1899, an analysis of the statistics yielded the fact

that the total poundage was 47,648,000, with a value of \$216,000. Only five States returned reports, and all of them were along the Mississippi, with Illinois leading and Iowa second. Iowa in 1899 produced 20,354,000 pounds, or an increase of 137% in five years, but by 1908 a decline had already begun. In that year Iowa produced only 4,699,000 pounds. Thereafter, mussels were sought in other places and brought to the Iowa factories on the river.

The clam fisherman never toyed with capitalistic ideas. He was and is still the lone fisherman working the waters for what they will yield. His reward is the joy of a day's good catch, and whatever he may get from the shell buyer. He is a gambler, too. His efforts are less tiring on account of the thought of the baroques and slugs his haul may produce, and he occasionally dares to hope, with some justification, that he may find a pearl. Having heard of the handsome fortunes made from pearls found by chance while prosaically clamming, he looks assiduously, wistfully, if not miserly for the gem he reckoned on. He examines the dead mussels, the sorted shells, and the bottom of the boiling pan. But in the end he swallows his disappointment over the missing pearl, and finds consolation in some slugs and his pile of shells.



The lucky fisherman, if his pearls were large and fine, forsook his trade, often a mere side line to begin with, and gave himself the luxury of travel or a "nice start" in business or on a farm of his own. Eventually a new trade developed in the clamming business, giving rise to a middle man, the pearl trader. He was rarely of honorable character: his piratic tricks were numerous and subtle.

The pearl trader's business was conducted in any river town where the "mussel muckers" were wont to trade. His salesmanship was based on the principle that everything which glistens pearly white is a jewel to the prospective buyer, and should be sold as if it were. He purchased a slug, or perhaps a shiner, and his sale of it, done where the light was not too strong, gave him a comfortable if not legitimate profit.

Divested of their dead mussels by a simple boiling process over a fire on the shore, and thoroughly cleansed, the shells lay open for inspection, sorting, and the button maker. The heap of dead mussels was left as a heap, or some thrifty Iowa farmer took it to his hogs.

In the early history of the button business, when clams were first found in the vicinity of Prairie du Chien and McGregor, steamers towed the shells — sometimes five barges with a load of 500 tons

— to Muscatine and to various other points on the river. The United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries listed button factories in Iowa at Sabula, Clinton, Davenport, Buffalo, and Muscatine, for the year 1897. In the latter half of 1898, the number of cities having button establishments greatly increased, including some inland towns.

Muscatine achieved supremacy in the new enterprise as early as 1895. Partly because the industry had its inception there, partly because of the richness of the clam beds in that portion of the river, in part, also, because there the first automatic machines were invented, and in view of the fact that the lumber industry had already spent itself, Muscatine adopted this new interest with enthusiasm.

Following the first clam rush, "every woodshed" became, legendarily, "a button shop". In a short time, however, the woodsheds were refilled with wood, and large new buildings were erected for "button shops". The peak year of the industry was 1916. Into the factories every morning flowed a working population of men and women, girls and boys: men to the cutting machines; women and girls to the grinders, the facing and drilling machines, and to the sorting and carding departments.

Crude thick white disks emerged from the cut-

ting machines. Cleansed in tumbling barrels, they were classified according to thickness and made ready for the grinding, which leveled them to the standard sizes. After a second bath, the disks were fed into the drilling machines which made the pattern and the holes. The final process of polishing and beautifying the buttons was accomplished in wooden tumbling barrels. In a solution of hot water, acids, and powdered pumice, the buttons were whirled about until the discolorations were removed and the edges rounded. From these steaming open barrels, the rough disk emerged a pearly, shiny gem of usefulness.

In the stream of people that left the factory when the whistle blew were girls who had sat at their desks, sorting the buttons according to quality. With incredible swiftness the mounds of buttons melted as they were classified before being counted, weighed, and boxed in bulk for clothing manufacturers or distributed to individuals or groups for carding in preparation for retail sale. The earnings of those who sewed the buttons on the cards were the sum of little things, for a gross of buttons — twelve buttons on each of twelve cards — averaged two and one-half cents in wages earned. Nevertheless the industry at its height was pouring two and one-half million dollars a year into wages alone, excluding executives'

and salesmen's salaries, and the value of finished products per year was between four and five millions.

There was a pause in Muscatine's foremost industrial activity when, late in February, 1911, the button workers decided the time had come for concerted action against the wage scale and lesser matters pertaining to their work. A display of the strength of the organized working population of Muscatine, including the local unions of carpenters and joiners, the decorators and paper hangers, journeymen barbers, the clerks, and the button workers was made in a parade the next month. Fifteen minutes were required for the parade to pass a given place. The banners proclaimed their cry: "Who Said a Trial by Jury?" and "What Girl Ever Got a Fair Deal in a Button Factory?" (The average wage for a girl who had become fairly skilled was between \$10 and \$15 a week.)

To preserve peace, the State was called upon for military aid. Twice the call was issued, and companies of the Iowa National Guard from Muscatine, Davenport, Washington, Iowa City, and Fairfield prevented disturbance and the assembling of crowds at a time when three was considered a crowd.

Successful negotiations seemed apparent as a result of the efforts of Labor Commissioner Ed-

ward W. Van Duyn, only to be broken off again by a misconstruction of the terms. At length, on May 3rd, military rule was abandoned, and by the effective mediation of Governor Beryl F. Carroll, the factories were again opened and the employees resumed their former positions at the same wage scale, no discrimination being permitted against union workers. Later in the year the button workers quit again and were not taken back for several months, when they were compelled to return as non-union workers.

A growing scarcity of shells was becoming perceptible. The drain upon a great though limited supply was showing its effects. Added to this there was a change in women's styles which did not take buttons into account. The decline continued until, in 1925, by dint of a more intensive selling campaign and versatility in products, the companies reaped a gain over the previous year.

In 1923, the *Muscatine Journal* announced: "New Protective Tariff Hailed as Big Boon to Industry in Muscatine." This act placed a high duty on Japanese shell buttons. "Muscatine's button industry, held to a production averaging 40% of capacity during the last two years but now running at about 50% is expected to expand, when the Japanese surplus is used up. A full capacity by October 1 is expected."

But the industry did not rise to its former height. A study of mussels with a view to their propagation was undertaken, and the United States Biological Station at Fairport, Iowa, was the result of the research initiated by Professors George Lefevre and W. C. Curtis of the University of Missouri. The discoveries of scientific research were encouraging to the development of artificial propagation. Mr. Boepple was employed in the experiment station as a shell expert.

Buttons are now made in eight factories in Muscatine, and representatives of the industry are to be found in South America, Mexico, Cuba, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, and Bavaria. Mussel shells are brought from States east and west, north and south. They are not destined exclusively for buttons. On fashion's avenue, homes gleam in the sunlight with peculiar luster. Myriads of multi-colored pieces of shell, thrown promiscuously upon gray stucco, suggest the splendor of a royal house of dreams. The pearly fragments are not the pearl fisherman's prize; they are by-products of a modern industry.

The lust of man for treasure, the vision of a German craftsman, fisherman's luck, piracy, the business organization of a machine age — that is the romance of the pearl-button industry.

MARIE HAEFNER