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Washboards, Pigtoes, and Muckets: Historic Musseling in the Mississippi Watershed—Introduction

Mussels gleaned from the rivers of the Mississippi watershed have supported two important industries and provided millions of dollars of income to land-based and river-based men and women since the 1860s. This volume is a book about the historic uses of freshwater bivalves from rivers of the Mississippi watershed, for pearls and buttons.

Collecting freshwater pearls was the impetus for harvesting shellfish from 1860 to 1900 with the revenue for a single pearl often being in the thousands of dollars. Pearl rushes on a river created a boom-town-like atmosphere and attracted local, as well as out-of-state, musselers and buyers. Proceeds from pearls brought to many individuals instant fortune and have a heretofore unacknowledged role in the capitalization of rural America in the period prior to 1930. Pearl revenue exceeded that of all other natural product industries combined, excepting timber, in many areas.

Most important of the commercial uses of riverine shellfish was the production of buttons from 1891 until approximately 1950. It is this industry that is the focus of this monograph. Shell buttons were made of both pearly ocean and freshwater shell for centuries in Europe before being manufactured in the Northeast United States beginning in the 1850s. The United States product, based on an imported material, had a hard time competing with the European product, and the industry was dying out in 1890. John Boepple, an immigrant

master button turner, redirected the United States industry in 1891 when he began producing pearl buttons in Muscatine, Iowa, using shells from the Mississippi River. Ocean pearl button machinery was soon adapted to the harder freshwater shells, and dozens of plants opened in Muscatine. At first, the shells were procured from the Mississippi River bordering Iowa, but by 1910, they were coming from as far away as Alabama and eastern Kentucky. The activity on dozens of rivers and in dozens of manufacturing plants and blank cutting shops is annotated, complemented by ethnographic information on the musselers. The production process, modeled after both the timber and ready-made clothing industries, was based on piecework by men who cut blanks and women who faced, sorted, and carded them. Labor issues were largely responsible for the industry's inability to compete successfully with the Japanese product by 1919, while the raw material resulted in a high proportion of unsalable buttons. These two factors combined to kill the shell button industry by 1950.

But musseling in the Mississippi Valley watershed did not die with the freshwater pearl button industry. Those who dealt the death blow, the Japanese, found another use for those shells. Today, Mississippi watershed mussels are used in the Japanese cultured pearl industry and the infant United States cultured pearl industry. Thousands of American men and women have made a living musseling for this Japanese industry since 1950. Interviews with several people give the flavor of this little-known livelihood and portend an end to a century of commercial musseling as the Japanese round pearl is replaced by the cultured baroque pearl, produced in the Tennessee River, which does not begin with a shell pellet. One hundred and fifty years of Anglo-American commercial musseling began with natural pearls and it may end with the cultured pearl in the next two decades.

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