

White River Pearls

In about 1900, Dr. J.H. Myers discovered a pearl inside a mussel near Black Rock on the Black River. Word of his discovery soon spread and people began finding pearls in mussels in the White River, too.

By 1913, White River pearls had become **renowned** throughout the United States and in foreign countries. The **high lime content** of the rivers and stream produced the perfect conditions for the mussels to make pearls.



The largest pearl found along the White River was found by a poor preacher by the name of Morgan. Morgan's pearl weighed **126 $\frac{3}{4}$ grains**. Morgan sold the pearl to a local buyer for \$300.

The pearl was a "**peeler**" which meant the outside layer wasn't very lustrous. The hope was the layers could be peeled off to reveal a beautiful pearl underneath.

The local buyer sold the pearl for **\$3,200**, a fortune in those days. It changed hands three or four more times before being peeled in New York.

It turned out the pearl was **totally worthless**.

Pearling

Pearls were usually harvested in July or August after all the crops had been “**laid by.**” They were plentiful at first. As more people began digging for the pearls, they became harder to find.

Eventually, people used **20 foot long John boats** poled into the center of the river. There were no motors. Men dove from the boats into the river.

To sink to the bottom, they placed a **large, flat rock** in the bib of the overalls to sink to the bottom. Sam Jeffery was said to be among the best divers.

Carl Smith saw diving equipment in a mail order catalog and decided to build one himself. He used the gas tank from a **Model T**, glass from an old stove, and the block from the Model T to push air into a hose. He used **mineral oil** instead of motor oil because it tasted better.



Several men **drowned.** Earl Gillihan tried using Mr. Smith’s diving gear one time, nearly drowned, and never tried pearling again.

Shelling

In the beginning, the pearl was the prize. Shells were thrown away. During the Great Depression, the shells became the prize. If a pearl was found, it was a bonus.

On a good day, **100-200 pounds** of shells could be harvested. Jack Bonner, a prominent buyer, bought shells for \$10-30 per ton. On a good day, a man could make **\$2 a day wages**. This was good money for the Depression.



Shells were harvested and “**boiled out**”. The meat was removed and used for catfish bait or fed to hogs or chickens.

In the early days, shells were shipped North to **button factories**. Shells were too delicate and often broke. Several button factories opened in Arkansas.

“**Blanks**” were stamped out of the shells and shipped North. The blanks were then finished into buttons at factories in northern states.



During the Depression, Arkansas produced **1/3 of all the shells** for button-making nationwide.