

CHAPTER V

PEARL FISHING

In the years when Grandfather and his companions spent much time in fishing, an old Norwegian used every summer to come to Brodhead and to spend much time at the river. The Norwegian never talked with us boys except to say, when we questioned him as to what he was doing, that he was digging clams for bait. That would have seemed to us understandable if we had ever seen him fishing, but we never did.

Now it happened that Grandfather in his reading had learned that pearls were found in oysters - why not also in clams? Perhaps the old Norwegian was hunting pearls. Let us also try to find a pearl. Now it happened that clams were very numerous indeed. They stood on edge half buried in the river bottom and in some places were so numerous, it seemed as though one could hardly have found room to put another; in fact, the boys thought them the greatest impediment to fun in swimming, for their shells were very sharp, and since clams usually stood on edge, they cut our feet whenever we stepped on them.

There were several varieties of clams, the most common being what we called a crinkly edged clam. Normally a clam was about the size of your hand and one end looked as if at some time when the shell was soft, someone had run a fluting iron (an iron used in that day to flute ruffles on dresses) around the edge.

Now it happened that there really were pearls of great value in these black, crinkly edged clams, but what we boys did not know was that these pearls lay loosely under the flap of clam meat which ran around the

outside rim of the shell and that unless a clam was handled carefully, the pearl of great value was likely to fall out and be lost forever.

We all started pearl hunting, digging clams out of the river bottom and throwing them up on the bank "ker plunk", so that if by chance a pearl were in any clam we found, the pearl dropped out and was lost. Hence, although we worked steadily for several days, our efforts were not rewarded. Finally one of the boys did find a pearl about the size of a pea and round but, as Grandfather recalls it, "dead" - that is, without color and luster. However, it was argued that if pearls really had any value, that pearl would make a fortune for all of us, and if they were not of value, we were only wasting our time. In either case, we would do well to return to our fishing.

Years passed - Grandfather went to college, but the old Norwegian kept on spending his summers digging clam bait in Sugar River. At last a storekeeper, who went fishing one summer afternoon, saw the old Norwegian digging clams and suspected, as we boys had done years before, that he was hunting for pearls. The storekeeper began digging clams, handling the clams carefully and, sure enough, he found a pearl. Now it happened that some of this storekeeper's friends, noticing that the storekeeper closed his store every pleasant day to go fishing, thought he had gone crazy, especially as he never brought back any fish. They followed him over to the river and there they found him "digging clams for bait." They in turn guessed what he was doing and started to dig clams for themselves. Now when these friends also closed their stores every day to go fishing, others became worried and went over to the river and thus the great secret leaked out.

When Grandfather returned from college for summer vacation, his mother told him how there was a rumor that pearls had been found in clams in Sugar River, but that most people did not "take much stock in it." Grandfather, however, readily believed the rumor to be true and early next morning went pearl fishing. He worked energetically that day and the next, found several small pearls - none of great value. Unfortunately all of these have been lost except the one which in 1931 Grandfather still was wearing in a stickpin in his necktie. Three pearls which Grandfather found were made into a wedding ring for Grandmother, but one day the ring was stolen while Grandfather and Grandmother were at a circus parade.

Grandfather continued to work Saturday, but already crowds of pearl hunters were beginning to arrive. The craze, for such it became in that little town, reached its height on Sunday. It is said that the minister, who usually drew the largest and most fashionable congregation, had that morning only three in attendance and is said to have exclaimed: "Where is my congregation?" "They are pearl hunting", and he proceeded to deliver to the three a sermon on "Pearls of Great Price" and the "Iniquity of Working on the Sabbath." Your grandfather did not dig pearls that day, for he had been brought up to observe strictly the Sabbath and never went fishing or swimming on that day. He did, however, walk over to the river to see the sight, and a most humorous sight it was.

Several hundred people, equipped with rakes, stood in water which ranged from ankle deep in some places to water as deep as any person could stand in, digging clams like mad, with a blazing hot sun beating on their heads. Women usually held up an end of their long skirts in one hand to

form a receptable for the muddy clams. Men either carried a basket or wore an apron. You may well imagine how attractive some of these society belles looked after wading in water waist deep and carrying to shore muddy clams in the folds of their skirts.

Besides, many did not know how to open clams. One man, seeing a clam shell partially opened, put in both thumbs and tried to pull it apart. But the muscles of a clam are very strong and when the clam shut up on both his thumbs, he yelled "bloody murder" until someone with a sharp table knife cut the muscles of the clam and released him.

This Sunday not many pearls were found. Most of the clams were handled too roughly and probably many valuable pearls were lost. Some pearls, however, were found. For example, a group of men had accumulated quite a pile of clams on the shore and opened about half of them without luck and then abandoned that pile to go further up the river. A negro barber came along and, with the natural indolence of his race, decided to open those which he found already dug. In the pile he found a pearl which that evening he sold for \$25.00. The man who bought the pearl resold it shortly for \$100 and that man in turn finally sold it to a professional buyer for \$500, and the pearl passed out of the community.

In a few days the clams were exterminated except for a few in deep water or in hidden gullies. Meanwhile, a considerable number of pearls of value had been found, some of which were reported to have sold for as high as \$5,000. Professional buyers flocked to the town and "bear" rumors were started that the fresh water pearls had been found to be valueless in order to get the unwary to part with their pearls at less than their value.

Bunde & Upmeier, a leading jewelry house in Milwaukee, brought some order out of the buying chaos by establishing a scale of prices based on weight, size, shape and luster. Their display of Sugar River pearls at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893 attracted much attention and was probably one of the finest collections of pearls ever put on display.

Meanwhile a buying and selling craze seized the town. Many who had a pretty bead at home put it in a small box of pink cotton and displayed it for admiration.

One way to test the roundness of a pearl was to put it on the glass top of a showcase to demonstrate how it would roll. One day a man displayed in a box of pink cotton a steel colored pearl. This was an unusual color, but Sugar River pearls displayed a wide range of colors. The pearl would roll perfectly on the showcase and had a pleasing luster. The man finally sold the pearl to a friend for \$37, with payment of \$12 down, the remaining \$25 to be paid at the end of the next week. The following day the man who sold the pearl returned the \$12 and requested his "pearl" back, saying that it was one of the ball bearings out of his bicycle and that he was tired of walking.

The hotel proprietor of the city, John Young, became the most active local buyer. He knew little about pearls, but applied Yankee shrewdness in buying for as little as possible and then, it is said, took his collection to London and sold at a good profit. One day he was offered a small clear pearl which was very round. After some dickering he bought it for 50 cents. A little later someone displaying some pearls showed one which John could see at a glance was a good match for the one he had recently bought.

Now if you had two alike, they could be used for earrings, which were at the time much in style, and thus the value of the pair would be much more than twice that of either one. After considerable dickering, Mr. Young bought it for \$5.00. Then along came a man with a bottle of breath lozenges and said: "Here, John, is the rest of the bottle. You can have these for 25 cents."

Some of the after results were not so good. Some women who had always had maids and were not used to hard work and who had worked like mad in the hot sun that crazy Sunday became ill and never fully recovered their health. One of the oddest mishaps was that the cows in the pastures along the river ate the clams and became sick and the village had a milk famine.

Was not this an interesting experience to have had - a California gold rush, so to speak, right in our own little town.