

Pearl Fever on the Ouachita River

Mussels live in lakes, streams, and rivers in Arkansas and around the world. To live, they need cool, clean water. They prefer water containing some mineral content, which they use to build up their shells. The freshwater mollusk--like its salt-water counterpart, the oyster--creates pearls. Following discoveries in other parts of the country and in the state during the years around the turn of the twentieth century, Arkansas and the upper Ouachita River valley experienced what the *Malvern Times Journal* characterized as “pearl fever.”

Rivers in Arkansas have historically contained freshwater mollusks capable of producing pearls. Early on, archeological evidence indicates that American Indians used the pearls they found for ornamentation and as a part of their burial traditions. Such treasured items occurred only naturally in those days, before the development of cultured pearls. This made pearls quite special.

In the 1800s a discovery in the northeastern United States netted the finder a small fortune, setting off a flurry of activity that spread across the country. Freshwater mollusks were easy to find, and anyone could find a pearl inside them. People from all walks of life began to hunt for treasure. Families might even spend their vacation time searching for pearls, enjoying the time spent camping or outdoors, whether or not they found anything! They always remembered, though, that every mussel represented the “potential to pay for a farm, release all debts, and change a life.”

Arkansas’s pearl rush began just before the beginning of the twentieth century following several major discoveries in northeast Arkansas. That region of Arkansas became a popular place to search for pearls. However, the “pearl fever” spread to other parts of the state. In September of 1897 Arkadelphia’s *Southern Standard* reported that “quite a number of our citizens now employ their time in hunting pearls in the Ouachita. They find numbers of small pearls, which are of but little value. Very few of any value have been found that we are aware of.” Some papers stated that interest in pearl-hunting was so great that crops were left unharvested and employers experienced difficulties keeping folks on the job.

The *Southern Standard* observed a bit later that many of the treasure seekers had learned that pearls weren’t “worth more than about a dollar a bushel for the kind they find, about the size of a head of a pin, and a good number have abandoned pearl hunting and gone to picking cotton, which they find more profitable.”

Even with all of the pessimism, a major discovery in the upper Ouachita River valley offered encouragement to the dreamers after Tiffany’s of New York paid \$139.50 for a Ouachita River pearl. The pearl was found in the river near Lawrence Station (a stop on the rail line between Malvern and Hot Springs) by a man baiting a trot line with mussels, looking to catch some catfish. When he opened one of the mussels, he found an egg-shaped pearl weighing fifteen grains. The potentially valuable find was sent to New York for appraisal, and in turn, Tiffany acquired the pearl for \$139.50.

But, pearl fever gradually died down. Pearls continued to be found, and are still found occasionally today. In the early part of twentieth century, freshwater mussel shells came to be used in mother-of-pearl buttons, creating yet another valuable use for the mollusks.