

The Huron River – Part V

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The abundant fresh water mussel or clam population of the Huron River once provided a resource for an unusual business – clamming. For the first quarter of the 20th century, rivers throughout the state were exploited for their clams that were used to make so-called pearl buttons.

The Huron's clear waters saw a small number of clambers who dragged bars with crowfoot hooks behind flat bottom "john boats" across the clam beds. As a hook tine entered the open shell, the clam closed tightly on it. When the bar was heavy with clams, it was pulled into the boat. Clamming tongs that resembled giant salad tongs were also used to search the deeper waters. Others simply waded the shallows and sand bars collecting clams by hand. Once on shore, the clams were steamed to open the shell and release the meat.

Shell buyers from distant button factories came through this area each season. In 1913 a ton of shells was valued at \$18.94. Sixteen registered clambers from the Huron and Raisin Rivers sold sixty-six tons that year. By World War II, plastic buttons and over-exploitation of the clam beds led to the end of this unique business in our area.

Fresh water pearls were a welcomed bonus when found in the open clams. One pearl the size of a "cherry stone" netted a lucky Rockwood man a tidy sum.