

FORTUNES IN THE AMERICAN PEARL

SEVERAL weeks ago a New York pearl dealer sold a lot of domestic pearls to a Frenchman in Paris. The Parisian did not even take the trouble to ship them on to India, but after drilling them to a firm of American jewelers as Oriental pearls. When the man who had sold them to the Frenchman returned to New York a few days ago he found the gems on exhibition in a New York showcase. He recognized them immediately as the ones he had sold to the French customer, and for the fun of the thing he thought he would inquire about the price.

"We are asking \$5,000 for them," replied the jeweler. "They are genuine Oriental, and we ought to get a little more, seeing that the price of pearls is going up."

"Wait a minute," said the expert. "Please turn that pearl over. Now look just at the edge of the hole where the gem is drilled you will find a dark-colored spot. See it? Looks as if the skin had been bruised and had healed."

The jeweler looked, screwing his "loup" up to his eye and taking a careful squint. "That's right," he said finally. Then he snatched away his "loup" and gazed at the dealer. "Say," he asked, looking at the expert sharply and hugging the pearl tight, "who are you?"

"Tell you later; let's talk about those pearls. They are interesting to me. I used to own them once. I bought them out in New York, Arkansas, when they hadn't been out of the water more than 15 minutes. They cost me less than \$10,000. I sold them in Paris for \$25,000. They cost you about \$5,000. I could have sold them to you for \$15,000. Now, here's my name; here are some pearls—domestic ones like yours. Want to buy?"

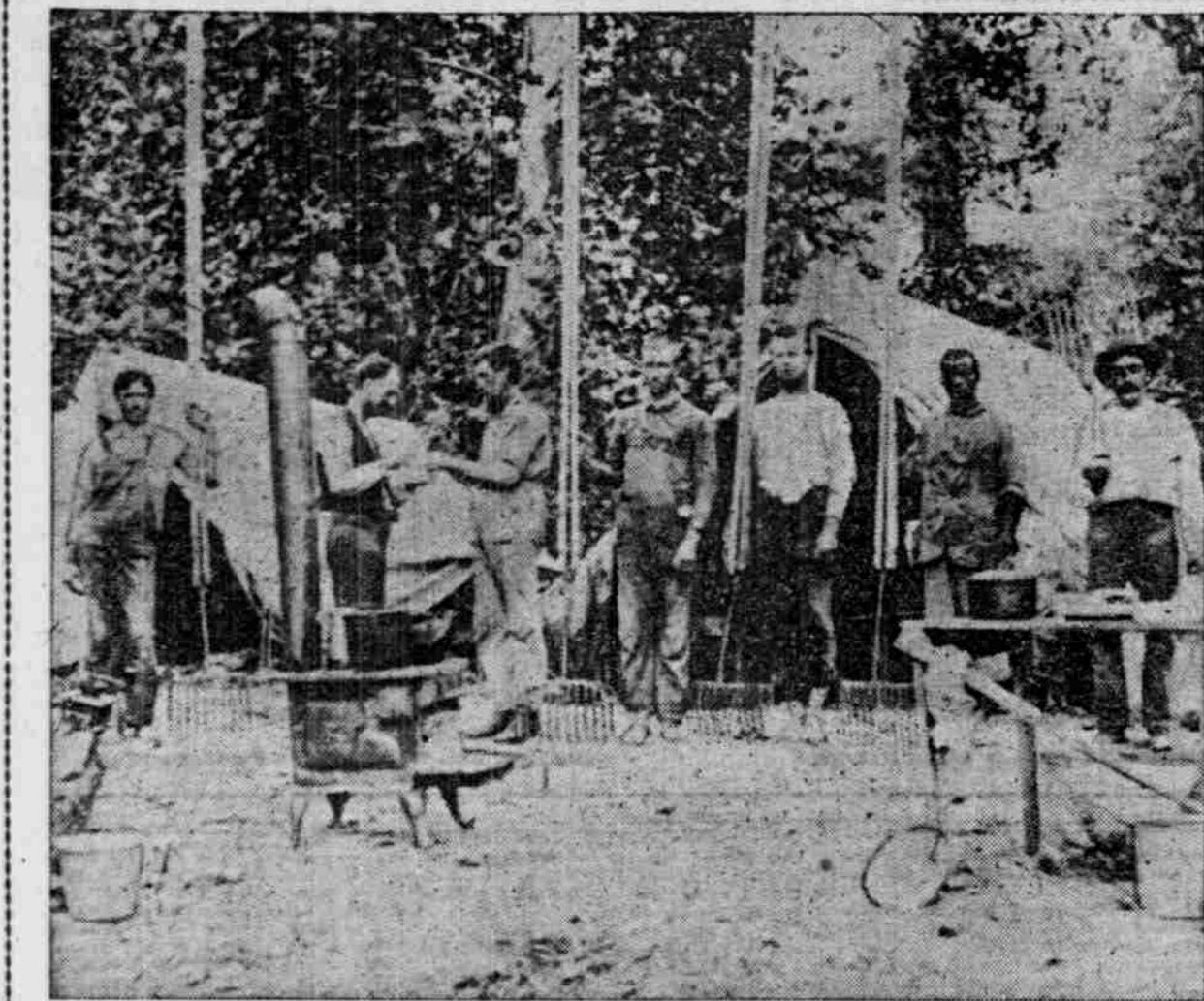
The jeweler almost fell over at the first revelation, but the second rattled him. "No," he said, rigidly, "we don't want to handle any domestic pearls. It will spoil our trade and reputation."

It is doubtful whether this or any other Jeweler will be able much longer to handle domestic pearls as Oriental jewels and thereby secure big profits, for the simple reason that the pearl-bearing clams are disappearing from the bottom of the Mississippi River and its tributaries at a rate that threatens total extinction of the species in a very short time. Many of the most productive rivers of the pearling sections have been swept clean of the pearl makers, and unless something is done soon a business that is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to the people of those sections will pass away as quickly as it came. And in this connection it is interesting to note that the pearl operators of Central Asia are now in force a law which will prohibit all pearl fishing for a period of five years.

Within the past three years more than \$3,000,000 worth of pearls have been taken from the waters of the Mississippi Valley. At least three-fourths of the pearls have come from the Black and White Rivers of Arkansas. In 1901 about \$1,500,000 worth of the gems were taken from the Black River alone, most of which came from a section not 50 miles long, with Newport as its center. Last year less than \$1,000,000 worth were taken, and this season the output has fallen off more than 50 per cent. The Black River has been entirely cleaned out and the swarm of fortune hunters has gone over to the White River, a few miles distant, and that, too, has given up nearly all its wealth.

When this river has been depleted the largest pearling region in the Middle West will become what it originally was—an unpopulated wilderness. Already thousands of people have left, and Newport and other towns which sprang up in a night are rapidly dwindling. In Newport more business houses and dwellings are vacant than are occupied; its population has fallen within a little more than a year from 15,000 to 4,000.

The other important domestic pearl center is on the Mississippi itself, around Prairie Du Chien, Wis., but it does not compare with the Southern beds, and fishing for pearls there is now a sideline to the industry of obtaining shells for the numerous pearl button factories



IN A PEARLER'S CAMP.

along the river in this vicinity. The Black River, both old and young, male and female, was delving for clams and pearls. Laborers left the farms, clerks and business men turned fortune-seekers, and even society women went down to the shores of the stream and waded into the water, searching for pearl-bearing clams.

An old negro named Neale Parks found a clam which netted him something over \$50. With the proceeds Neale purchased a fine buggy. Before he could buy a horse a circus came to town, and when it left the balance of Neale's bank account went with it, so he was compelled to sell his buggy without taking a ride in it.

The pearling fever started in the Summer of 1900. An old sunburnt fisherman was the cause of it. He was fishing from a skiff anchored in the middle of the Black River; his bait ran out and he wanted some more. The easiest way to get it was to take up a clam from the bottom of the stream, about eight feet below the surface of the water. The bivalve that he brought up was an innocent-looking specimen, and there was nothing in its appearance that foreshadowed the great excitement to come. The fisherman, whistling a little tune, inserted his knifeblade between the shells and pried them apart. As he did so a beautiful, round, lustrous pearl dropped out on the thwart of the skiff and rolled to the bottom of the craft, where it lay glistening in the forenoon sun.

The fisherman sat blinking at it for a full minute, then made a dive for it, and worked harder than he ever had before in his life to get to shore on the double quick. He sold the pearl to a local jeweler for \$50 and retired to his home. His retirement, however, lasted less than a week, for the report of the find spread far and wide, and the inhabitants of that section, including the fisherman, rushed at the sandbars at the bottom of the Black River with all kinds of implements, from pitchforks to scow dredges, and pried the river banks with clams for miles up and down the stream. The jeweler who had purchased the pearl from the fisherman sold it in New York for \$200, which was more than he had made in his little store in three years.

The excitement was intense in Arkansas, and in a comparatively short time their heads, but they have lost the rosy glow of youth. All about me the dandelions are lifting high in air their gauzy white balloons.

So different from ours at home, Nell, which were low growers, and if one rashly attempted to cut down one of the white-headed veterans, his head fell off and blew away. Here they are nearly two feet high, and that hollow, starry globe of lace-work, a wonderful stayer. Nearly a month ago, tempted by the beauty of these delicate transparencies, I cut a few of the slender stems and stuck them in a pot of growing ferns, not expecting them to last but a few hours, and here they are today; those fairy balloons just lifted above the green, fully inflated and glowing with the light of day.

Though we have the solitude, thank goodness we have not the gray desolation of Craterputtock, nor the gloom of a man of genius. The only sounds that came to me in this peaceful Eden were those of softly rippling, invisible waters, the low murmur of insects, the occasional dropping of the tiny brown cones of alders, and a faint rustle of falling leaves.

Nothing more. Even the clamorous cricket, silent. Our birds have long been mute, and now "Aldie" of the "luscious woodland" voiceless phantoms of the minstrel we once knew.

But, we have a visitor who has brought his voice with him. He has but lately come to us from out of the reeds and rushes of the lowlands; a mellowist; every morning comes floating up to us from this little glen, a melody so divine, that the angels above must fold their wings to listen.

From childhood I have loved this bird above all others. His notes are so inexpressibly mellow and sweet, so tender, too, with a wailing cry that is like a cry of pain. He is the most beautiful of the pathos of reminiscence, of prophecy, or of passionate pleading; I try hard to understand, but cannot. I only know there is in it, a cadence—

That touches me with mystic gleams. Like glimpses of forgotten dreams— Of something felt, like something here; Of something done, I know not where—

And tears fill my eyes as I listen. I hope, Nell, when "Aldie" goes out to sea, if the sea rolling blue, were dashing its foam there.

A luminous flood of sunshine; air soft, caressing, and sweet with the aromatic breath of the fir trees; brooding over all, "Nature's own exceeding peace," a hush unusual even in this land of silence. I thought—as I often do here—of the stillness of "Craterputtock," where "for hours the only sound, that of the sheep nibbling the short grass a quarter of a mile away," of "Carlyle writing his mother: 'These are the grayest and most silent