

## From the Vach Files . . .

### Pearls, Clams and Pine City

*Printed in  
update*

Clamming for pearls around the shores of Lake Pokegama and the Snake River was more than a pastime ever since the first pearl was found in 1905. During the summer, the local residents spent Sundays and whatever time they could raking clams to shore or a boat, examining each shell for a pearl. Clams in the 1900's were so plentiful, residents gathered them with rakes or pails, as they crawled along the shore.

The late Julia Dosey Peterson commented, "Wherever the clams were, you could find people, mostly young men, lining the shores of the lake and the river. My brother found a pearl and we had it put into a ring."

The success among the local people finding pearls worth \$250 to \$1,000 attracted outsiders and commercial clambers. Commercial clamming began in 1910. Boats equipped with hand-crafted devices began raking for clams off the bottom of the lake and the river. They brought sackfuls of clams onto shore. There men placed the clams into wire baskets and lowered the baskets into boiling water, but only for a brief time, so as not to destroy the luster of the pearl. The clams opened easier after being immersed in boiling water. The basket of clams was emptied on the ground around the boiling kettle. The men opened the shells, examined each for a pearl, and then threw the shell and the meat behind them. Soon the empty shells would pile up and form a circle around the kettle. Evidence of this donut type circle could be found on the shores of Pokegama Lake and the Snake River as late as the 1960's.

A party of clambers worked on the Ausmus farm, where the battle between the Chippewa and Souix was fought May 24, 1841. The clambers would leave behind other debris besides the clams, including a few skulls. Whether the skulls were from the 1841 battle or another loss of lives is questionable. The late William Ausmus remembered the clambers' camp. As a young lad, at night he would look out of the window and could see and hear the men talking and laughing. Most of all, he remembered the skulls wired to a fence post. The flickering of the campfires reflected on the white skulls, creating an eerie effect.

Pokegama Lake clams were of the finest quality. In 1911, the Cullter Bros. found a new use for the shells as buttons and ornaments. But they required clean shells. A new method had to be developed to remove the meat from the

shells. Each clamming party had its own certain way, but Cullter Bros. had large hooded steam kettles with screen racks which were heated with wood. Each cooker held 500 to 1,000 pounds of shells. After the clams were steamed, they were placed on another rack where the meat fell to the ground and the clean shells were loaded into wagons and taken to the railroad station to be shipped in box cars.

Cullter Bros. sold 80 thousand tons of shells from Pokegama Lake for \$20.00 a ton to H. E. Shute, a representative for Harvey Chalmer and Sons Company of Amsterdam, N.Y. Chalmer Co. had 11 factories in the United States where buttons and ornaments were made and waste material was utilized in the manufacture of poultry food. Some of the shells were shipped to Germany.

Cullter Bros. had a crew of 26 men and 16 boats, five with engines. They expected that on a good day one boat could bring in one ton of clams. "Visiting 'Round in Minnesota", by Caryl B. Storr, quoted a contemporary as saying, "The best haul I ever seen was at Pokegama Lake at Pine City, where they got \$7,000 worth of pearls out of seven carloads of shells."

There were two button factories near here. J. J. Madden's was in Pine City and Melvin J. Cherrier had his factory on Cross Lake until 1919. An advertisement the Pine Poker read, "I will buy clam shells by the pound, ton or carload."

The pearl industry was good for Pine City, even if it was short-lived. Unfortunately, the intensive clamming eliminated the clams in the lake. An effort was made to restock Pokegama Lake with pearl-bearing clams, but all in vain. The government forbade clamming for one year and later required a license to gather clams, but it was far too late as the clams were but a scattered few. Maybe if it had been better regulated, the industry could have survived longer. An effort was made to pick up the clams that were used for pearls only, but it was found to be impossible to clean the shells from the decayed meat and dirt. That effort to use the clam shells had to be abandoned.

In a newspaper clipping from time (not dated), it was reported that, "A gentleman found a pearl in Cross Lake, gave it to his wife for safe keeping. Never seen the pearl nor his wife again."

— Ann Vach

*Editor's Note — My sincere thanks to Ann Vach for this wonderful piece of Pine City history which she offered for publication in the UPDATE.*