

AMERICAN PEARL FISHERIES GIVE OUT

Large Shipments of Clam Shells to Button Factories Ruin Chances of Big Finds—Arkansas Specimens Better Than Oriental.

PEARL-BEARING clams are disappearing from the sandbars of Arkansas and the Mississippi River at a rate that threatens to make the species extinct in less than two years. The beginning of the end has commenced, and unless new fields are discovered soon the pearl-fishing industry of the United States will be a thing of the past.

The reasons for this are manifold. Of late years the demands on the clam have been more than it could stand. In addition to its "prize package" manner of yielding up pearls, the shell of the bivalve itself is of a practical commercial value. During the past year twenty-five factories for the conversion of clam shells into pearl buttons have been erected at Muscatine, Iowa. This now makes fifty-five factories in this one town alone in which the clam shell is made into articles of commercial value.

Early in the year shiploads of clam shells began to be exported, and this has been the means of disposing of whatever surplus yield there might be, and has also raised the price, so that now pearl fishers are no longer obliged to grapple all day for nothing in the hope of bringing up a prize bivalve. These shells bring from \$12 to \$15 a ton, and can readily be sold to barges, in which they are taken from the pearl-fishing regions to the factories.

Two years ago the Black River in Arkansas was the greatest pearl-yielding river in the United States, but its thirty miles of sandbars were worked by such an industrious gang of fortune

hunters that nearly every clam was removed from its bottom in less than nine months. Flushed with their success, these hunters then swarmed out on to the Mississippi. In this river the pearls are scarce and not so valuable, and not much was done in the way of getting rich until a very valuable pearl field was found in the White River, in Arkansas.

Thither hurried the pearl fishers. All the past season they have been grappling for clams there, until now, as the season closes, few clams are left on the sandbars. A month or six weeks more on this river will clean it out entirely, and perhaps forever, of pearl-bearing bivalves.

The next most promising field is the Cumberland River in Kentucky. Here the pearls are very valuable, but very scarce, and it is doubtful if it will be worked to any great extent. When this river is dragged clean, whatever domestic pearls there are left must come from the Mississippi, and these are so poor and so scarce that fishing for them can hardly be called an industry.

The Arkansas pearls have been of a particularly fine quality, some of them far excelling the Oriental pearl, and pearl dealers in the United States, until they saw the beginning of the end, have been happy. Now, however, in view of the fact that pearls are rapidly becoming more popular, and promise in the future to be the rival of the diamond, jewelers will be much affected when the domestic pearl has become a rare article.