

# White River Mussels

Most of us wear buttons and jewelry without giving much thought to where they might have come from. In the first half of the 20th century, most buttons in the United States came from the White River in northeastern Arkansas, and this river still contributes to the jewelry business.

Native Americans and early settlers traveled the rivers to hunt for food and furs, and to establish settlements on its banks. The river valleys provided rich soil for agriculture, abundant game, and vast stands of virgin timber. The White River provided an additional economic boon. Its freshwater mussels have long been harvested for food, but meat is not the most important value. Mussels have a pearly outer shell, and some mussels hide either a perfect pearl or an imperfect pearl called a slug inside. Native Americans made tools from the outer shells, and jewelry from shells, pearls and slugs, both for their own use and for trade.

When European-Americans learned of this treasure, they first sought only pearls. But during the late 1800s the shells were found to make beautiful, strong buttons for clothing. Shellers donned homemade diving gear to harvest the mussels individually by hand, and boats were specially equipped as shelling rigs to harvest larger quantities from known mussel beds. The shells were purchased by factories which opened in nearby towns to produce round disks of shell called blanks. Blanks from the White River were highly favored by makers of fashionable pearl buttons on the east coast and in Europe.

The mussel shell button industry declined when plastic buttons became mass-produced in the 1930s and 1940s, but a smaller industry still exists here in Arkansas. Mussels are harvested and shipped to Japan for seeding of cultured pearls. The shells are cut into small cubes, tumbled and pressure-ground into small balls, and inserted into salt-water oysters. Within a year the oyster covers the ball to create a cultured pearl which is strong enough to be drilled for stringing without cracking. Pearl jewelry has probably changed quite a bit from Native American styles to today's ornaments, but throughout the ages, Arkansas' White River remains a source of beautiful fashion.

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