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Clamming was a Good Business at Port Maitland and Dunnville

Photo attached; waw708 Clam Diggers at Port Maitland from Dr. Don Bell taken by his mother in 1916 .

Last year, Estelle Pringle told me of a gentleman who had a photo his mother, Louise Teeter, took in 1916, of some men clam fishing at Port Maitland. As it turns out, I knew this gentleman. He is doctor Don Bell, who was originally from Binbrook. Dr. Bell, who is now retired, had his practice next to the Binbrook Post Office where I was once the Postmaster.

I have asked many old, and not so old fishermen about fishing in the Grand, including for rough fish and not one of them ever mentioned clams and I never thought to ask about them. I took the photo to my now departed and blind friend, Carroll Kenney, and described it to him. "Oh yes, of course" he exclaimed. "The shells were sold to the button factories in the Kitchener area," (formerly Berlin). Carroll then told me how, while still in elementary school at Stromness, (circa 1921) he worked with other youngsters digging out the meat and looking for pearls.

Wide rakes on very long poles were used to gather in the clams. They would set flagged poles into the mud, marking where they had raked. The clams were taken to Port Maitland to a location roughly where Talisman Energy, is currently located. They were put into large vats of boiling water until the clams opened. The meat was removed, and searched for pearls. Any pearls that were found were placed into a tin can, and many were found! Mostly they were egg shaped, but fairly good quality. Many were "et hum" *borrowed*, by the workers, including twelve-years-old Carroll. Carroll remembered taking about three or four to school and placing them in his ink well, only to forget to take them home. The next day they were gone! The shells were shipped in freight cars to Kitchener where buttons were made from them. As many as seven car loads were shipped at a time. Though he does not ever recall eating any himself, Carroll thought the clams were eatable. However, most of the meat was tossed into the river.

Bill McIntee, recalls clam fishing with his father Barney, below the dam. Barney, was one of those old-timers who knew every secret the river held. Bill recalls that though very young he drove a *gas boat*, towing the scows from one location to another. The scows were flat bottomed, square ended boats, generally moved by the use of a push pole. Barney sold his catch to Harley Clark, operated from location on the Grand River, roughly where the current cement plant is today. Here he carried out the same tasks as were performed at Port Maitland. Youngsters were paid ten cents an hour to dig out the clam meat from the boiled clams and feel for pearls. The meat was thrown into piles and generally left to rot and collect maggots while the clams were hauled to nearby railway cars at the former TH&B

station by Harold Chittley in a gravel wagon.

In an effort to solicit facts I send letters to various Kitchener-Waterloo, and Guelph newspapers, asking their readers for information. To my pleasant amazement a number of people contacted me. All offering different bit of wisdom; mostly about locations of various button factories in the K-W area.

Bill Limebeer, from Guelph wrote ; *“As a child growing up in Waterloo in the 1930's I was familiar with the Rauschman Button Factory which was located on Regina Street, a few blocks south of Erb Street E. I think I can remember that there were loaded railroad box cars delivered on a siding beside the building containing shells, which I thought were from oysters. I noted that there were holes in the used shells which I believe were where the buttons were cut out.”*

And a phone call came from a Dennis Bell, in Cambridge. Dennis told me about a former button factory in Cambridge near Shantz hill, where the Jerry Van Dyke Travel Agency is presently located. Then an email from Stan Hilborn, and Susan Kappler, confirming the details given by Dennis. And an email from April Eby, telling me of her father's family's connection to a local button manufacture.

There was the phone call, from Gerard Higgins, owner of Preston Cement. Gerard told me while doing some work at the Grand River Hotel at King and Dolph streets in Preston, he found some old, - possibly shell buttons in the foundation. I bet there are a number of Preston residents who can tell us what Gerard found and why!

Along the way, I learned of files stored at Doon Heritage Crossroads in Kitchener. With the assistance of Elizabeth Hardin the Registrar/Researcher, I was able to review ledger's and other files pertaining to the Dominion Button Manufacturing Co., but was unable to find any connection to Port Maitland or Dunnville. I had hoped to find letters or invoices naming Port Maitland or Dunnville businesses who did business with factories in the area. But no luck! I would encourage anyone with information regarding button manufacturing in the K-W area to contact Elizabeth. You may reach her at 519 748-1914 ext 228 or by email at hliz@region.waterloo.on.ca .

As in Dunnville and Port Maitland, children were used extensively in the manufacturing of buttons. I discovered a reference to the age of the children and found a number to be seven years and younger. I even found one recorded as only *“one years old.”* I can't explain that! I did find a number of articles confirming the Grand River clams were used in the manufacture of buttons. It was generally felt that the fresh water clams from the Grand and the Thames, did not produce the quality of shell that well suited their use as buttons. It seemed they did poorly in the washing process prior to manufacture and the resulting buttons were too soft and flimsy to withstand washing once attached to clothing. This may account for the relative short period of time they were fished in our area.

If you have items, you wish to have written about or pictures you would be willing to lend me, please drop me a note. Let me know how you feel about these articles. William (Bill) Arthur Warnick 180 Rosslyn Ave. South HAMILTON, ON L8M 3J5 e-mail wwarnick@cogeco.ca Phone 905 549-6086.