

The Button Factory

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Back in about 1910, a button factory opened up in town to make pearl buttons from clam shells gathered from the bottom of the river. Some people would fish for the shells with their hand, working in water so deep they could barely stoop and keep their heads above water. They felt for the clams which were nearly buried with just the hinged joints of the shells out of the sand or gravel. Hey would fish until dark, then at night they would open the clams.

They always looked for pearls. In the Fox River, fresh water pearls were quite common. Mostly the pearls were small, but some were found worth from \$ 1,000.00 to \$ 2,000.00.

Ordinarily, people made fair wages clamming. Some would use a boat with 15 or more strings and large hooks hanging from poles, dragging the bottom. As the clams where hooked, they would close up on the hook and hang on until they were opened with a large-bladed knife. The shells are hauled to the factory and sold by the ton.

From each shell, various sizes and thickness of buttons were made according to the location on the shell. After the shells were processed, the shell residue was used as driveway fill or on roadways.

The factory was located in their building east of what is now Schneider's store (Schneider's, torn down in 1984, was located at the south end of the old bridge on the east side of Route 47 at Hydraulic Street). The pile of discarded shells would nearly fill the street (Hydraulic Street). The factory, as I remember, was the Rabine Brothers Button Factory. As the river became polluted, the clams nearly disappeared and so went the factory.

