

# IOWA HISTORY



Women working in button making factory  
[Photo Courtesy Library of Congress]

## Change of Luck for Unlucky Jim

Button making factories could be found in towns all along the Mississippi River in 1909. Muscatine was known as the “Pearl Button Capital of the World.” And upriver in Lansing Jeremiah Turner, a retired steamboat captain, had started a button making business in the late 1890s, according to the *Des Moines Register*.

The establishment of the Lansing business was a stroke of good luck for the people living in and near Lansing. It meant jobs for men and women who worked in the factory making products, including buttons, from mussel shells. And it meant a nearby market for the men who made a living clamming in the Mississippi River near Lansing.

In the summer of 1909 a clammer from Lansing identified simply as “Unlucky Jim” made news throughout the United States when his luck changed. Jim, like other clammers, dredged for clams to supply button factories with shells; but they also hunted for pearls as a sideline. And occasionally they found the precious gems.

Unlucky Jim was known in the area as being an unlucky fellow for a couple of reasons. He was married with nine kids. And he had never been lucky in finding valuable pearls.

There were plenty of stories circulating about others who had been lucky. Clammers had claimed to find pearls selling for as much as \$7,500. But those stories were met with skepticism. Most people believed the most paid for a fresh water pearl from the Mississippi was \$2,650.

But in the summer of 1909 that changed. W.T. Gardner from Le Claire and I.E. Anthony from Camanche showed up in Davenport with a “splendid 50-grain pearl” wrapped in a “generous amount of tissue paper” according to the *Perry Daily Chief*. Gardner had a reputation as one of the leading pearl buyers in the area. He declared the marble-size pearl was the “most perfect pearl” that had ever been found on the “inland rivers.” The flesh colored pearl was “almost a perfect sphere” with “not a speck or blemish.”

The two men said they had purchased the pearl from Unlucky Jim in Lansing. They paid him \$3,000 for his find. It was surprising to most people that the pearl had been found in the Mississippi River because it was well known that the old clam beds had become exhausted over the past few seasons. Buyers like Gardner and Anthony had moved to the tributaries in their quest for pearls. They had spent the summer at Wabasha, Minnesota.

Newspapers from New York to Los Angeles recounted the story of Unlucky Jim and his change of fortune. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Gardner and Anthony planned to sell the precious pearl in New York to a buyer who was willing to pay \$5,000.

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