

The Tennessee River

Freshwater

Museum Farm · Tour Jewelry Showroom



TennesseeRiverPearls.com
BirdsongResort.com



defense mechanism. The nacre gives the pearl its iridescent shine or luster.

The Freshwater pearls vary in natural color with various shades of white, cream, yellow, orange, green, blue, purple, rose, gold, gray, silver and black and brown. Some colors are considered to be rare, more attractive and desirable than



Freshwater pearls, the only gemstone from animal origin, may be found growing in the waters of the Tennessee River Freshwater Pearl Farm in Benton County. John Latendresse (1925-2000) began attempting to culture pearls in the fresh waters of North America approximately 25 years ago. Over 300 bodies of water were tested for ideal conditions before the final selection of the initial eight pilot locations to begin attempts at culturing. Success levels were measured and compared. It was determined that the prime location for productivity was only five miles from his home, in the placid embayment of Birdsong Creek in Camden, TN.

others. Although there is no universal agreement on what color a perfect pearl should be, white seems to have become the time tested classic.

Mussels native to the Tennessee River have a quality that is unlike most species. The actual shell of the animals is of a greater thickness than those found anywhere else in the world. Tennessee has in excess of 50 million dollars in annual exports to foreign countries of the shells alone. Other countries acquire the thicker American mussel shells to create their nuclei. All freshwater pearls, whether from China, Japan, Tahiti, Taiwan or other countries in the southeast, most likely originated with a seed from the Tennessee River Mussel shells.

Gina Latendresse, daughter, who is now president of American Pearl, said that it had been stated at one time to her father, "there is no way you'll be able to start a pearl farm in the United States." "He was bound and determined to do just that," said Gina. John wasn't always supported in his efforts in growing pearls, but in 1986 he had his first successful harvest. Today the Freshwater Pearl has the prestige of being the official gemstone for the State of Tennessee.



John Latendresse (1925-2000) was truly one of the true pioneers in the pearl industry. His daughter, Gina, is now the president of American Pearl Co. The company still manufactures freshwater pearl jewelry.



2001 marked a new beginning for the Tennessee River Freshwater Pearl Farm. Bob Keast - second-generation owner of Birdsong Resort - continues the legacy as the new owner of the pearl farm.

The mussel the animal used for culturing freshwater pearls is natives to the Tennessee River. The interior of a mussel consists of a compilation of Nacre- the s a m e a n i m a l

secretion that forms a pearl. Nuclei can be any shape or size to pre-determine the shape of the end pearl product. Tennessee produced freshwater pearls are grown in many different shapes to accommodate the demands of the fashion industry.



The Washboard Mussel

Technicians implant nuclei and mussels are placed into baskets in groups of eighteen. They are then suspended 18 inches below the top of the water dangling from American-made "bamboo" also know as PVC pipe. The mussels are left for 18 months to three years depending on the quality that is desired.

The mollusk is a bi-valve whose only purpose in life is seemingly to clean or filter water. They consume the tainted water of the river and expel it repeatedly, possibly moving one foot a year. Occasionally a foreign object like a fish tail, parasite or even it's own eggs get caught into the foul-smelling meat of the mussel and can not be expelled. The imbedded item becomes an irritant to the mussel and the animal must protect itself. It secretes nacre, as a

Latendresse passed away in 2000, leaving his legacy for his family to continue. His wife Chessy, daughters Gina and Renee, and son J.K. are involved with the on-going operations of the American Pearl jewelry facet of the business. The farm is now owned by Robert G. Keast, second-generation owner of Birdsong Resort, Marina and Campground in Camden, TN. The farm still is working, growing and producing the pearls Latendresse founded in North America.

The Tennessee River Freshwater Pearl Farm is a unique hidden secret down the back roads of Benton County on the waters of Birdsong Creek. The working farm hosts a tour May through October that takes visitors to the farm where they witness a pearl emerge from a mussel. Tourists learn all about the process from implantation to the finished product. The freshwater pearl farm attracts visitors from around the world and may be found in the demographic study for

Tennessee's Top Twenty Attractions, with over 300,000 people visiting annually.

Visit the Museum, mini-theatre, and pearl jewelry showroom year around. Tours are by reservation only. For more information about The Tennessee River Freshwater Pearl Museum, Mini-Theatre, Farm, Tour, and Jewelry Showroom visit www.TennesseeRiverPearls.com. For more information about Birdsong Resort, Marina and Lakeside RV and Tent Campground, visit www.BirdsongResort.com.

