

WPLN – TENNESSEE PEARLS

6/30/03

t jarrell

Announcer – About the only Tennessee pearl folks have heard of is Minnie Pearl, but for the last quarter century Tennessee has been home to the nation's only **freshwater pearl farm**. WPLN's Todd Jarrell reports:

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(AV: TJ PEARLS) Q...todd jarrell." 4:56

Lead/Tag: :16

Total: 5:12

Music Out: 6:03

Host Tag: Join us tomorrow, as Todd Jarrell reports on Tennessee's importance to the world-wide pearl market.

Interviews:

Gina Latendresse – President, American Pearl Company

Bob Keast – Owner, Tennessee River Freshwater Pearl Farm and Birdsong Marina

Gennette Sain – Co-owner, Sain Jewelers

Host Promo: Coming up on Morning Edition, WPLN's Todd Jarrell reports on Tennessee's one and only pearl farm.

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JARRELL – The Nashville office of American Pearl Company President Gina Latendresse is painted with bright island colors. A shimmering South Sea island image hangs above her desk, from which she sells pearls worldwide—a desk covered with the fruits of the family business.

LATENDRESSE :“**Let’s look at them. I have huge bags here full of pearls... :09**

SFX: *Pearls, pearls, pearls dribbling off table* :14

JARRELL – Pearls cascade from the bags—thousands of creamy, roseate, and rainbow-washed gems conjuring up the exotic and the faraway. But their origins are very close, for *these* pearls were raised in Tennessee.

Gina’s father and company founder John Latendresse entered the Japanese pearl business in the Fifties, just as cultured pearls became popular. He and his Japanese wife Chessy, a trained pearl stringer whose mother was also in the gem trade, firmly believed pearls could be cultured in America.

Pursuing this dream, Latendresse visited three hundred southeastern sites, testing water, rainfall, regulations... all of the variables of pearl farming. According to Gina Latendresse, her father finally established America’s *only* freshwater pearl farm in 1980 near Camden on the Tennessee River.

LATENDRESSE – “...And it was just so funny that less than ten miles from his own home that he had lived in since 1954 was where his current—the current pearl farm—would exist and also

flourish.”

With the perfect location at hand he approached the Japanese pearl industry with his plans, plans not taken seriously by the secretive Japanese pearl cartel.

LATENDRESSE – “...they basically laughed, you know, “Ha, ha, ha. You Americans don’t know anything about growing Japanese pearls.” And my father looked around and he said, “You know, I’ll take that as a challenge, and you watch.”

Her father returned ten years later with a handful of gem quality pearls, only to be accused of wounding Japanese national pride by hijacking their cultured pearl heritage.

LATENDRESSE – “...he stopped and he said, ‘You know, I see a lot of Hondas, and Daihatsus and Mitsubishis running around here and Henry Ford is part of our heritage and part of our history and look what you people have done.’ So he said, ‘I have every right to be in this business.’ And of course the end of the story is that it was so quiet that you could hear a pearl drop.”

Latendresse went on to establish a worldwide niche market by cultivating distinctive geometric, marquis, teardrop and coin shapes for his Tennessee pearls.

LATENDRESSE – “He wanted people to say, “Oh, those came from Johnny Latandresse.” In fact they call him the Pablo Picasso of the pearl industry because he made these really interesting shaped pearls.

And according to Gennette Sain of Nashville’s Sain Jewelers, the quality of the Tennessee River pearls stand up to pearls worldwide...

SAIN –They have a real high luster they are beautiful. When you are talking about other countries you don’t see that quality I don’t think...

SAIN – “Theirs are just as fine as anybody’s any where.”

Outboard motor starting and accelerating

KEAST (singing)- “We’re on our way to the pearl farm.”

decelerating >>> >>shuts motor off>>> water swirl and driplets>>

Birdsong Marina owner Bob Keast bought the pearl farm as a tourist attraction after John Latendresse’s

death in 2000. Spread across perhaps four acres of placid green water are the floats under which the pearl producing mussels grow.

KEAST: “They dangle underneath the water about 18 inches in the baskets floating on what I call American-made bamboo—PVC water pipe—the water pipe is forty feet long with a cap on each end to provide buoyancy...

SFX –Splunk!

KEAST: “These pipe hold all the mussel baskets and in each basket is somewhere between eighteen and twenty-four mussels growing their pearls. :14 Now some mussels grow more than one pearl.”

The pearl growers’ secret is the nucleation process—the surgical implanting of a bead made of mussel shell into the tissue of a live mussel, which will coat the bead with layered secretions that harden, creating the pearl. When asked to see the nucleating laboratory Keast has a ready answer...No.

KEAST : “Cuz if we went to the Coca Cola bottling plant right now we could see the syrup going in, we could see the fiz going in, the cans and the bottles coming down the conveyor belt, but do we ever go into the laboratory where the secret of the formula is? No.”

In fact it turns out Latendresse never really shared his nucleation secrets at all...

KEAST – “He understood the manufacturing and I understood the tourism, so it made a good marriage once he allowed me the right things to do and only know so much. Laughs.”

And Keast *does* know promotion—he welcomes more than 200-thousand visitors a year, making the Tennessee River Pearl farm and Jewelry Showroom a Tennessee “top fifty” tourist draw.

For Nashville Public Radio, I’m Todd Jarrell

For further information:

The Latendresse Family & The American Pearl Company

<http://www.americanpearlcompany.com>

The Tennessee Freshwater Pearl Farm

www.TennesseeRiverPearls.com

Fernbank Museum of Natural History

<http://www.fernbank.edu/museum/flash/pearls.html>