

FOSSIL PEARLS: VERY OLD, VERY RARE

You probably don't know much (if anything) about fossil pearls. I sure as heck didn't, at least until a couple from Florida contacted Eve Alfillé with the following query: *I was wondering if you could help us. We have a lot of 29 fossil pearls, and various other fossil blister pearls. We have been looking worldwide for an appraiser who could give us a price on these pearls. Do you know of someone who can do this sort of thing? We have had two of these tested by the AGTA so— yes— we know these are natural pearls; they range in size from 7mm to 16mm.*

This started me on the quest to find out more about these very unusual unpearllike-looking concretions... and then Gina Latendresse and K.C. Bell chipped in with their samples and their expertise, which gave birth to this article on yet another interesting facet of collectibles in the pearl world.

To begin with, let's define the term "fossil pearl." The American Museum of Natural History's web site defines fossil pearls thusly: *The oldest known fossil pearls date from 230-210 million years ago, although mollusks have undoubtedly been producing pearls since they first appeared about 530 million years ago. Always rare, fossil pearls are almost always associated with marine bivalves, although ancient freshwater mollusks also produced pearls. During a pearl's fossilization, the aragonite (the mineral that makes up most of the pearl) is replaced by calcite or another mineral, but in cross-section the fossils show the same concentric layering as in modern pearls. Occasionally the original*

aragonite is preserved with its nacreous luster.

The site then displays three individual fossil pearls along with a small cluster of them, and the notation: *Fossil Pearls, Pinna affinis, London Clay, England Eocene Period (50 million years ago). These fossil pearls have retained their nacreous luster, possibly because the fine marine mud in which they were buried— now turned to rock—prevented the nacre from dissolving during fossilization.*

John and Lorna Heuckeroth, the folks from Florida who originally contacted Eve Alfillé on this matter, then got in touch with me on their part of the story: a 29 fossil pearl collection they have for sale.

You can see their full collection at <http://www.trapperjohn411.com/pearls>.



One of the pearls in the Heuckeroth one-of-a-kind fossil pearl collection, the largest of its kind in the world for this epoch; this shell is extinct.

According to Lorna: "We are husband and wife fossil shell hunters with a collection of 29 unusual, very unique, and quite rare single fossil pearls that we have accumulated over the past 13 years. These are not just any

pearls, these natural fossil pearls came from an extinct fossil bivalve which makes these pearls very rare.

"These single pearls range in size from 7mm to 16mm. These shells come from the Pliocene era and here are the specs: Family: *Mytilidae*. Genus: *Perna*. Species: *conradiana*. As you can notice by the pictures: they still have their nacre.

"And we also have quite a collection of blister pearls ranging from geoducks (*Panopea*), quahog clams, spiney jewel boxes, and even fragile fossil shells with blister pearls such as *Penns* and others. The entire collection would total over 1,000 pearls if each of the blister pearls would be counted on the shells... quite possibly the largest collection of fossil pearls from the Pliocene and Pliestocene era in the world.

"We live in Florida so our fossil shell hunting has been conducted solely here in Florida. We have collection of so many fossil shells we could supply a museum gift store, maybe even several museums. We have given away a few to friends in the past, and there was one was sold a few years back to a private seller. Now this full collection is up for sale.

"From Wikipedia: The Pleistocene epoch on the geologic time scale is the period from 1,808,000 to 11,550 years BP. The Pleistocene epoch had been intended to cover the world's recent period of repeated glaciations. The quality of shells from the Pliestocene and Pliocene periods is like no other, and many of them are extinct; some are so new species to science so that they don't even know the

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names of yet.

"We seem to be addicted to fossil shell hunting, and have been at this for 13 years, first starting by hunting bones and sharks' teeth, then graduating to fossil shells, which is our passion. Our collection of shells range from pure white shells to pretty blues and blacks, some having the coloration of lighting bolts running through them; some are oranges and reds, and— what makes it more interesting— a lot of the shells are extinct."



Another piece of the Hueckerroth collection, their jingle shell.

The quarter is placed so as to give its relative size.

The Heuckerroths add: "If you want to be the only one in the world with this super rare collection of fossil pearls, we are entertaining bids till the Fall of 2008. Telephone in the U.S.A.: 941-391-0462. E-mail: trapperjohn411@comcast.net."

The Latendresse fossil pearl



This is another view of the Latendresse fossil pearl featured on the cover. John's daughter, Gina, tells the story so much better than I could ever write it. So here it is, in her own words:

Not much is known about this fossilized mussel. And for that matter, it could be a saltwater oyster.

My father, John R. Latendresse, was known for his desire to collect artifacts from the rivers of North America as well as waters from around the world.

This fossil has been around since I was a little girl. I recall Dad showing me the artifact in the mid 1970's. He said a diver had found it in the Tennessee River. And with a huge smile, he shook it near my ear and asked "What do you think that is? "Do you think it is a pearl mixed with sand?"

The phone rang and he left me to examine it. He often had long conversations with clients or with his business associates. At the end of the visit, I saw him carefully pack it with newspaper and into a box. It disappeared into the darkness of his personal vault.

It reappeared in the early 1990's as one of his desk decorations. And every so often, upon

entering his office, I would shake the fossil.

He would smile and I smiled back at him.

He said, "One day, we will find the answer to the mystery of the mussel, but for now, it is nice to dream about its contents."

When he passed away, we put most of his collection items in the vault. Each year in Tucson, I bring something to share. For 2008, it was the fossil.

The fossil weighs 14.3 ounces. It is likely that he acquired it in the 1960's as much of the interesting items he owns were found during that decade.

It measures 4 x 3.5 inches. And when you shake it, inside it sounds like there are three to five pearls with pebbles or sand mixed in.

It still makes me smile. It even appears to have some shiny areas where he handled the fossil and perhaps the oil from his hands are still present.

Awesome.

Part of K.C. Bell's large fossil collection

Our longtime pal and collaborator, K.C. Bell, has a fine fossil pearl assortment of his own, and kindly sent us a CD-ROM of 22 selections from his collection. We don't have the space to include all of them here, but we did select six of the most appealing specimens to show yet another facet to

this relatively unknown and rare type of pearl.

If you would more information on these fossil pearls, contact K.C. at KCB Natural Pearls / 1530 48th Avenue / San Francisco CA 94122-2802 / USA. Phone: XXX-415-759-7528. Fax: 415-759-8767. E-mail: kcbnaturalpearls@cs.com. ❖



Fossil blister pearl group on matrix fossil shell fragment; *Inoceramus* sp.; fossil extinct oyster, upper Cretaceous Period, 70 million years of age, Niobara Formation, Ness County, Kansas. 9.5mm. 66 grains.



Fossil pearl group in matrix *Inoceramus* sp.; fossil extinct oyster, upper Cretaceous Period, 70 million years of age, Eagleford Group Formation, Kamp Ranch Member, Dallas County, Texas. Round, 7.17mm



Fossil blister pearl; *Inoceramus* sp.; fossil extinct oyster, upper Cretaceous Period, 70 million years of age, Eagleford Group Formation, Niobara Formation, Ness County, Kansas. 24.74 x 20.45 x 13.64 mm. 164 grains.



Fossil blister pearl group on matrix fossil shell fragment; *Inoceramus* sp.; fossil extinct oyster, upper Cretaceous Period, 83 million years of age, Niobara Formation, Ness County, Kansas. Group, 642 grains.



Fossil shell fragment; *Inoceramus* sp. fossil extinct oyster, upper Cretaceous Period, 70 million years of age, Kamp Ranch Formation Dallas County, Texas. 3 of 8 pieces.



Fossil pearl; *Inoceramus* sp.; fossil extinct oyster, upper Cretaceous Period, 70 million years of age, Eagleford Group Formation, Kamp Ranch Member, Dallas County, Texas. Semi-round, 18.1 x 15.33 x 15.57mm. 116 grains