

PEARLS: Culture grows up around pinctata maxima

Continued from Page 1

Whitstable, England, grabbed a helmet from a suit of armor at a nearby manor house, told someone to pump air instead of water from a hose into it and dashed into a burning stable to save the horses.

Hardly had the smoke cleared than he thought the idea might work under water. It did. Or did after Deane invented the lead shoe to keep from turning upside down.

Broome is an accident of nature, just as the pearl is. If it is not at the end of the earth, you can see it from here. The nearest city is Koepang, 350 miles across the sea in Timor, Indonesia. Its remoteness has bequeathed it a heritage of both raffish mining camp and imperial propriety.

Fighting was "in the true English fashion." No eye gouging. One fight lasted three days. Bowling pins were champagne bottles.

In the bad old days, by one account, the Broome clergy "forgot" references to Sodom and Gomorrah were regarded as appropriate tributes to civic progress rather than as warnings of future divine retribution.

Broome may be the smallest town on earth — 6,500 residents at the moment — with its own Chinatown.

"We have just about every race here," says Haynes. "Someone asked my father once 'how about an Eskimo?' He looked around, and sure enough he found a half-Eskimo. If he'd looked harder, he'd probably have turned up a full-blooded one."

They were and are here because the pearl oyster is.

Pinctada maxima

Pinctada maxima is a tropical bivalve that lives on the bottom of the vast continental shelf off the northwest coast of Australia, the world's largest oyster bed. It grows to the size of a salad plate as it dines on plankton passing in the current.

When storms or tides sweep a speck of sand into its shell, it reacts as anyone would with a pebble in his shoe. It tries to vomit it out and usually does. But if it can't, it begins coating the irritant with nacre, and a pearl is born.

One oyster in a thousand or more will have a pearl. If there's copper in the water, it will be yellowish. If zinc, it will be, well, pearl-colored.

Maxima likes flat, rocky, silty bottom. This makes it hard to see, as it is covered with marine growth like everything else. It burrows in the silt and can only be detected by a slight ridge of muck around its perimeter. Younger shells make the best mother of pearl (mop). The older ones usually are scarred by worms.

The aborigines long knew about maxima. They used the shell for ornaments or ground it up in a rain-making ceremony.

Caesar brought pearls from fresh water mussels in Great Britain back to Rome. In the 13th century, Ye Jin Yang cultured pearls in China by putting tiny buddhas in oysters. Louis XIV of France wore a huge pearl in his crown.

Englishman William Dampier noted the presence of maxima while exploring this coast in 1688. A lieutenant named Helpman out of Fremantle down the coast found a pearl in another species, pinctata radiata, in 1858.

Not long after, a bloke named W. Tays, an athletic sort who threw the hammer, sought to reverse his ill fortune and collected nine tons of shell which he sold as mop for 1,350 pounds. The pearl rush was on.

The pearl rush

You could buy a sailing lugger for 150 pounds and pay it off with your first ton of shell. If you found a pearl, too, so much the better.

By 1875 there were 57 luggers licensed for pearling. The first divers were aborigines. They could stay down an average of 57 seconds. Unscrupulous whites put the bush people into virtual slavery.

Gradually, Asiatics began crewing the luggers. They came cheap, could stand the cramped quarters, could subsist on fish and rice for the months a cruise lasted, and if they got uppity, could be deported as aliens.

By the 1880s, Deane's diving suit was introduced, and the Japanese quickly showed an uncanny ability to find oysters. If they survived — in 1914 alone 33 divers died from the bends — they could earn enough in a few years to live on the rest of their lives. The Japanese divers were the aristocracy of the waterfront and had particular contempt for the dark-skinned Koepangers. The Filipinos hated the Malays. So the shrewd boat owners sailed with mixed crews, safe in the knowledge that the ethnic groups were too antagonistic towards each other to unite in a mutiny.

Ashore, it was a white man's world. Aborigines were confined to quarters after 6 p.m. They couldn't speak to a white unless spoken to. With the nearest civilization a week's sail away, Broome developed an exotic life of its own.

Back in town, the Europeans looked and acted like Ronald Colman in a film epic about the heyday of the British Empire. Despite the sweltering heat and constant red dust, they wore fresh whites daily. Some sent their clothes to Singapore to be laundered. A yuppie of the day might spend a third of his income on

getting the red grit washed out of his whites.

It being Australian, Broome of course had a race track and still does. Orientals and aborigines could watch the horses but not from the white grandstand.

Below the elite life of the veranda lay the inevitable waterfront subculture which was as murky as the depths the divers lived in. Bars stayed open until the last drinker went home or collapsed. Gin slings were free for early risers until 8 a.m.

Wartime halt

World War II brought pearling to a halt. Housewives brought cakes down to the docks for the Japanese divers as they left for home and the enemy side of the war. They returned in 1942 when Japanese planes from occupied Timor shot up the town. By 1944 there were only 10 Europeans in Broome. Most of the luggers had been burned in a scorched waterfront policy.

Feeling ran high about the Japanese after the war, but by 1953 some of them were back and 42 luggers were pearling out of Broome. The Japanese, who had mastered the art of culturing pearls in their akoya oyster — a smaller gem that takes twice as long to develop as with maxima — had begun pearling intensively around Thursday Island in the Torres Straits.

The Japanese controlled the world pearl market just as the Debeers syndicate monopolizes the diamond

trade. This even though Broome produces 60 to 70 percent of the world's finest cultured pearls in a \$40 million-a-year harvest.

By the end of 1971, a trial Aussie boat had taken only 16 percent of the oyster haul of the Japanese. The next year, however, two Australian luggers took 10,000 shells in four days against only 5,000 for the hard-hat divers.

The Japanese got the picture, and the last helmet diver retired in 1975.

High-tech culturing

The Japanese still carry on their old traditional pearl culturing at Kuri Bay, but the Aussies have begun a new technique, raising seeded oysters in their natural environment, the sea bed.

Teams of skin divers hunt the bottom at the end of a sunken outrigger. "You might find 10 shells in half an hour," he says.

The boats go out for eight or 10 days in the March-November season when the tropical cyclones don't blow. (A storm in 1935 killed 141 pearlmen and sank more than two dozen luggers.)

Natural pearls still turn up and are prized by oil-rich Arabs. One of the biggest pearls ever found in these waters was found in a sloop bucket of discarded oyster meat.

The oysters are implanted with small nuclei machined from the shell of the pig toe mussel found in the Mississippi River. The nucleus is carefully inserted in the oyster's gonad and the animal is put back in



In an old pearling firm in Broome, Australia, Australians master the technique of seeding oysters.

Associated Press Photo

the sea to do its thing for two years.

An oyster can be reused to try again. Older ones are seeded with half nuclei to produce hemispheric pearls for brooches and such.

"X-rays can tell us if the oyster is producing," Arrow says. "That helps free-up stock."

In Broome itself, khaki brush dress has long since replaced white suits. The horses still run at the

yearly meet, particularly for the Sam Male Memorial Broome Cup.

Grandchildren of Japanese divers who married into the melting pot mingle freely with the Westerners. Timeless aborigines laze under baobab trees out of the noonday sun drinking beer.


But there are still some old sailing luggers, now converted to diesel, resting on the mud awaiting the 28-

foot tides to carry them once more out to the pearling grounds.

Cleopatra wore pearls. So did Elizabeth Taylor. The gems are no less appealing for bearing the touch of man.

"It's still nature that's making something so beautiful," Arrow says, rolling a gem across a table top to demonstrate its symmetrical perfection.

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