

History-making pearl harvests on Kentucky Lake bring in visitors

Tennessee Town Touts Itself As Home Of Nation's Only Freshwater Pearl Farm

By AMBER McDOWELL / Associated Press Writer



Pearl farm manager Don Nerren pulls a mussel net from the pearl bed on Kentucky Lake near the Birdsong Resort & Marina in Camden, Tenn.

CAMDEN — Catfish and bass may be the most well-known catch on Kentucky Lake, but marina owner Bob Keast is counting on another sort of animal to reel in tourists — mussels.

The slimy, mud-covered mollusks made history here almost 20 years ago by producing the United States' first successful harvest of freshwater pearls.

It was a result of decades of research by pearl farm founder John Latendresse, who became fascinated with pearl culturing while living in Japan as a soldier in World War II.

Latendresse's pearls gave tourists a reason to visit this rural west Tennessee town, previously known only as the site of country music star Patsy Cline's fatal plane crash.

When Latendresse died in 2000, daily work at the pearl farm ended. But four years later, Keast — who owns the adjacent Birdsong Resort & Marina — continues the legacy with his "Pearl of a Tour."

Keast bought the pearl farm, but not the pearl culturing technology, from Latendresse's children. His business has been noted by Gov. Phil Bredesen as an example of "agritourism" in Tennessee.

Agritourism — a nationwide trend — gives farmers and other small-town entrepreneurs a way to supplement their income, while giving city folks a new experience outdoors.

Keast's Tennessee Freshwater Pearl Farm and Museum falls under the "aquaculture" heading of a Web site touting Tennessee's agritourism destinations, which include the Bucksnot Trout Ranch, Hatmaker Wholesale Bait in Normandy and the Bell Springs Fisheries in Riceville.

Nestled down a winding road some nine miles off Interstate

40, Birdsong Resort & Marina looks like any other lake resort — except for the pearl jewelry displays.

There's also an advertisement for "Pearl of a Tour" T-shirts for "Only \$14.95." An Elvis Presley picture sits above a fireplace, surrounded by photos of Keast with Tennessee governors past and present.

"What drives me is the tourism. And tourism is the second-largest industry in Tennessee," Keast says while navigating a pink-and-white striped pontoon boat along the pearl farm's waters, where dozens of rows of yellow plastic pipes bobbed with the waves.

Suspended below the pipes are hundreds of netted grates. Each holds about 18 mussels.

Keast explains the pearl-making process to visitors, starting with how the mussels are implanted with tiny pieces of other shells. But the cultivation process is so secretive that Keast won't reveal much.

"Only a half-dozen people in America know how to do this," Keast tells visitors.

The pearl farm's origins trace back more than 60 years, when Latendresse lived in Japan while serving in the military. While there, he developed a love for two things: Chessy, the woman he would ultimately marry, and pearl culturing, an age-old industry that at the time was the sole domain of Japan.

When Latendresse brought his wife back to Camden, he "also brought back the custom of pearl making," Keast says.



Pearl farm manager Don Nerren holds a pearl produced by one of the farm's mussels as he displays it for young visitors from Kentucky at Birdsong Resort and Marina in Camden on June 16. (Photo Courtesy of John Russell / AP)