

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Mrs. CHGO-3  
Pearls

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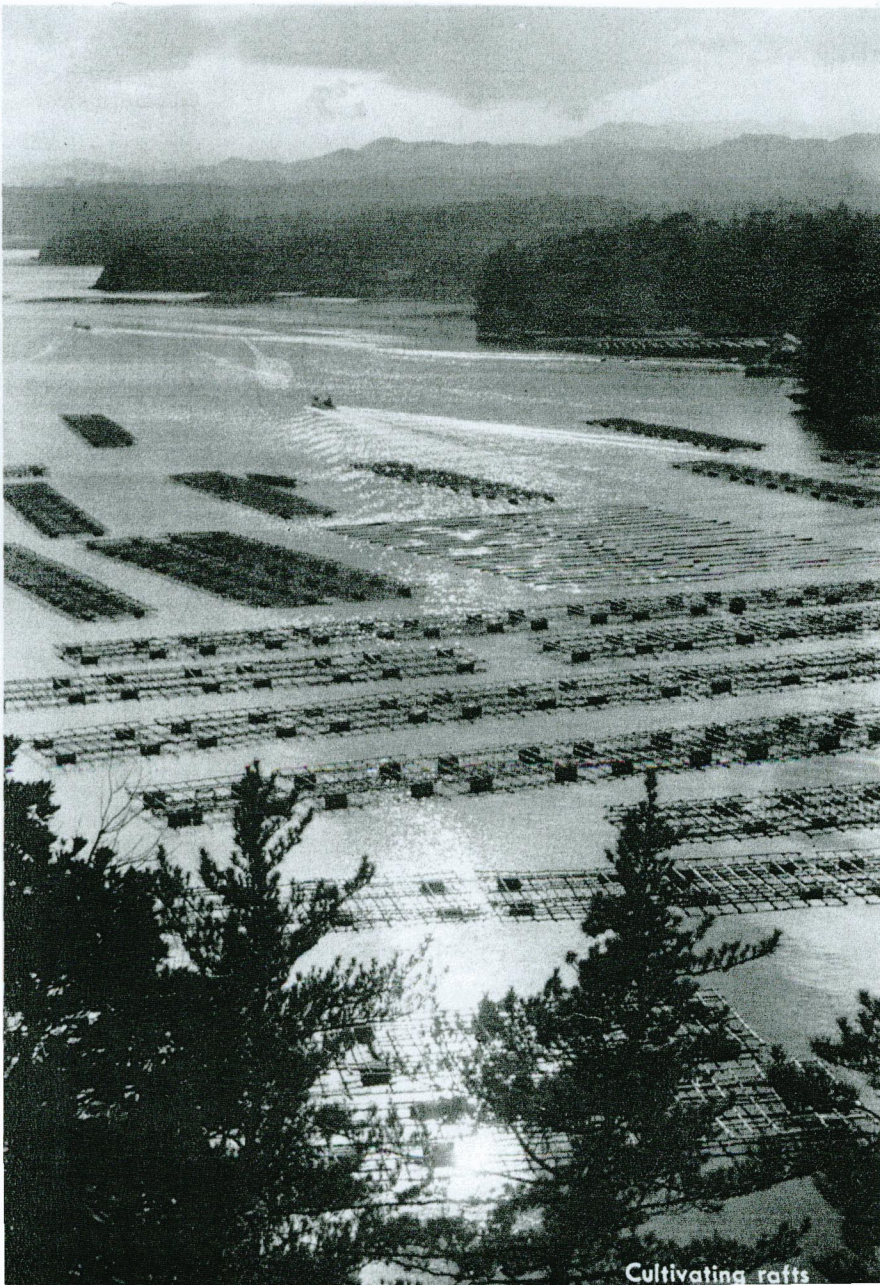
July 20, 1964.

Mr. R.H. Nolte,  
Institute of Current World Affairs,  
366 Madison Avenue,  
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Dick,

Within a couple of weeks of returning from Japan I came across two newspaper articles reporting the urgently growing demand for pearls. One, a fashion article, began: "Suddenly, its pearls!" The other talked about "the current worldwide supply squeeze" and went on to describe how "countries have to line up and make reservations on future output (of pearls) in Japan." Last year the U.S.A. imported about 19½ million dollars worth of pearls. This represented an 8½% increase on the previous years imports, and the European Common Market group increased its imports of pearls in the same year by 39.6%.

The worlds of fashion and business and their sense of urgency seemed utterly remote in the tranquil atmosphere we found when we visited the home of the cultured pearl industry. We stayed at Kashikojima, overlooking one of the calm inlets in the Ise-Shima Peninsula where about 60% of Japan's cultured pearls are produced. We first saw it in the early evening, magically serene, with low, pine covered hills sloping down to the water's edge, rows of oyster rafts stretching way into the distance dotted by small floating huts. In these, women worked cleaning the shells, and the murmur of their voices and the occasional putt-putt of an engine carried across the water to us as a boat traced its way homeward through the channels among the rafts.



Cultivating rafts



The next morning we joined a group to tour the bays and learn more about pearl culture. There was one American and one Spanish couple, and about ten immaculately dressed young Japanese honeymooners. On the boat we were shown trays of oyster shells and encouraged to purchase them for 500¥ (about U.S.\$1.50) each. The "lucky dip" shells were prized open to reveal their treasure -- usually two pearls, some good, some streaked with black and bumpy. We also got a closer look at the oyster rafts. Each is made of the ubiquitous bamboo poles floated on oil drums, and supports about 70 cages suspended by nylon rope to a depth which will provide the oysters with the most favourable temperatures. Each raft contains about two to three thousand oysters. These rafts were first used by Mikimoto, the man who first devised a way to cultivate pearls in 1893. He found the rafts and cages could protect the oysters from dangerous fish and seaweeds and could be towed to places of safety to protect them from typhoons, cold currents, decreased salinity, and certain plankton -- some of the many elements which can destroy the oysters and waste years of effort. The shells are also cleaned of encrusting growths three times a year and put back into freshly prepared cages. Yet despite the constant skill, care and vigilance required during the one to six years the pearls are growing, only about 40% are found perfect enough to be sold.

There are hundreds of small pearl farms in this area, but the majority of farmers lack the capital to cultivate pearls for the long periods (three to six years) required to produce the larger pearls which are the most highly prized.

Our boat took us to one oyster farm where we watched four or five girls inserting nuclei into oyster shells. Although carried out in a simple wooden hut by village girls, this is a highly skilled surgical operation. Their tools reminded us of visits to the dentist, and we learnt later that Mikimoto was greatly helped by a dentist who developed the tools for this work. One of the great problems of the men who first developed the cultured pearls was to produce spherical pearls. This is now accomplished by using small, perfectly round polished balls made from shells -- large thick clam shells imported from the Mississippi (previously from the Yangtze). Depending upon the size of the oyster, from one to five nuclei are inserted into each shell. The all-important part of an oyster for pearl growth is the mantle, which produces the precious mother of pearl to coat the nuclei. During the nuclei inserting operation, a minute square, chopped from the threadlike



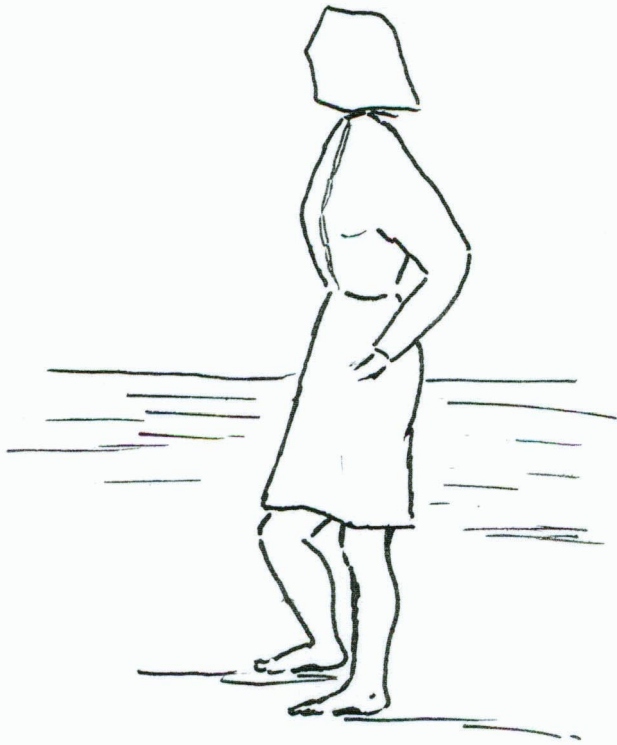


mantle of another oyster is also placed carefully inside the shell of the mother oyster which is then put into the raft baskets for cultivation.

After leaving our guided tour, we visited the National Pearl Research Laboratory at Kashikojima. Here, and in two or three other centers, work is being carried out searching for improved methods of pearl culture. For example, a study is being made of the factors which influence the colour of pearls, such as the depth of water they are grown in, and the position of the nuclei within the oyster. We saw an excellent display of the history, methods and tools of pearl culture, but the language difficulty proved too great an obstacle and our visit was disappointing in that Geoffrey was able to learn very little of the general aims of the Laboratory, of its importance to the industry, or to what extent it was used and appreciated by the local pearl farmers. Our interpreter was the hotel reception clerk who, though willing, had little knowledge of things and vocabulary scientific. When we arrived it seemed that most of the staff were out to lunch, but he found a scientist to talk to us. Tea was produced. Geoffrey explained his interests and questions. Long translation, longer pause. The scientist was evidently completely non-plussed by this inquisitive foreigner. A thought occurred to him -- "Had we seen the display of the pearl oyster life cycle?". "Yes." Pause. A few more gently prodding questions. A longer pause. "Would we like to see microscope slides?" To his obvious relief and our private resignation, we agreed to this suggestion and followed him into a darkened laboratory containing some handsome equipment. Here we were joined by the director of the Research Laboratory who was also unable to help on the general questions, but I was most intrigued by a velvet-lined conjurors box he showed us. Inside was a treasure trove of pearls--artificial, cultured, and natural--of different qualities, and with the aid of ultra violet rays the most precious glowed marvellously luminescent. Others, even though genuine pearls, looked leaden and grey. I strongly recommend a purse size version of this instrument for all prospective pearl buyers.

The next morning we set out to see the pearl divers at work, the women who collect the mother oysters for pearl cultivators and, occasionally, the rare natural pearl. (Ways of cultivating baby oysters are also being used to supply the increasing demands of the industry.)

After a half-hour ferry trip across the bays we entered a tiny Cornish style harbour behind which Chinese style roofs showed above a moss grown wall. As we walked along the jetty we passed a huge turtle lying on its back, out for the count, but vaguely wagging a flipper at us. Although knowing full well he was due for the pot, I was given illusory comfort by Geoffrey's reassurance that he had seen many like this one still able to rock themselves upright and saunter off. This had been on a river-boat on one of the headwaters of the Amazon where the turtles were kept on their backs alive until needed for food, and Geoffrey had occasionally been astounded to meet one "strolling the deck".



## Pearl Divers





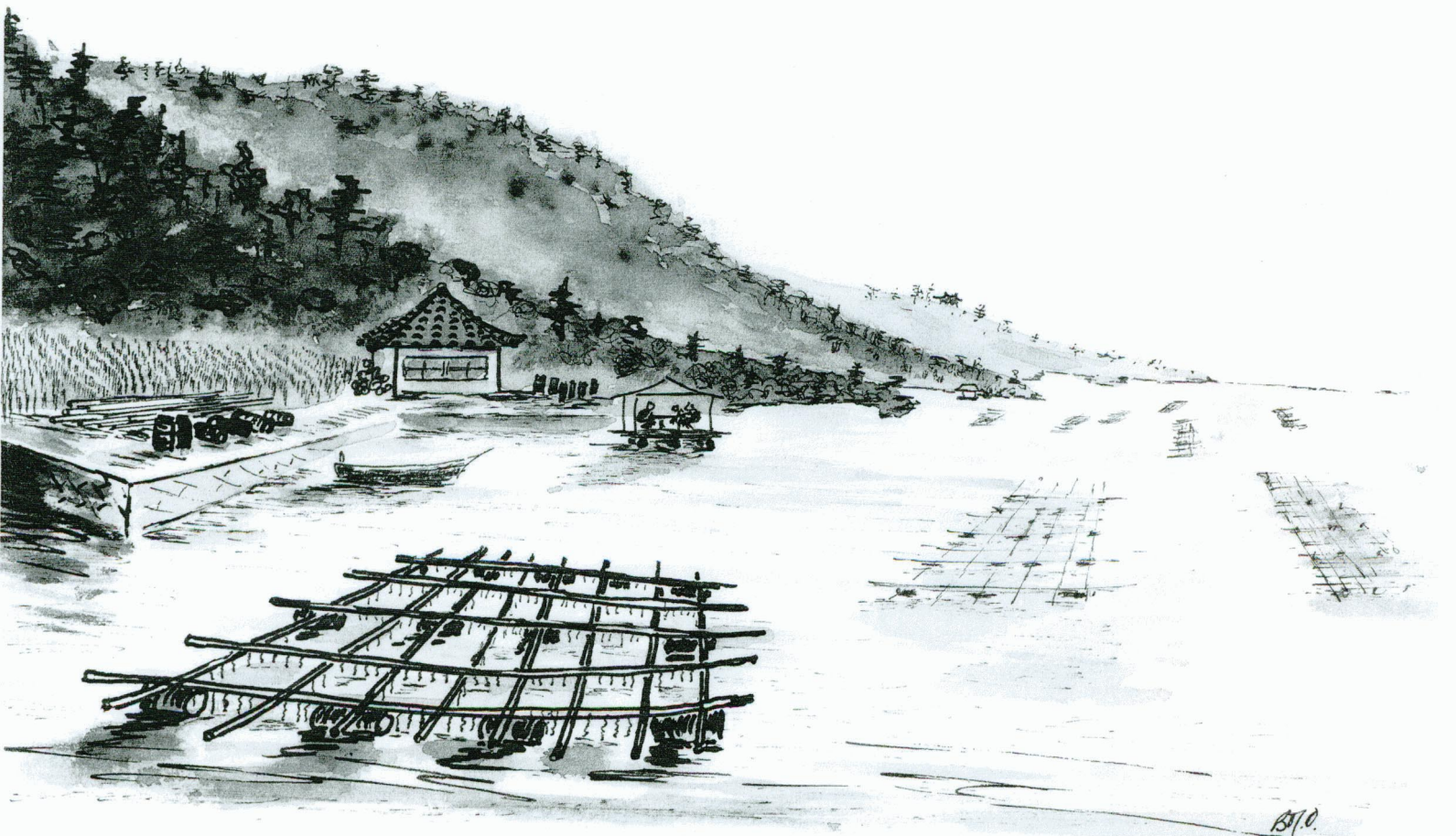
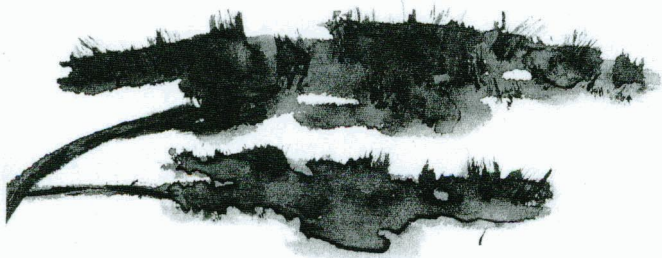
Despite our contradictory associations of Cornwall and China when we first saw the beautiful little village, we had been in Japan long enough by that time to take completely for granted the Japanese efficiency which produced the bus on schedule to meet the ferry. Although just a local bus serving small fishing villages along an outlying peninsula, it was as clean and comfortable as all we rode in, with the customary vase of fresh flowers near the driver's seat, and a neat conductress. These teenage girls were supremely self-confident and efficient. As we passed through villages where the bus windows were within inches of rooftops, the bus frequently had to reverse to avoid oncoming traffic. Out would hop the conductress and blast away on a whistle to guide the driver quickly and calmly out of tricky situations. We found amusement in contemplating similar situations involving Latins!

Like everyone who has become accustomed to seeing heavy manual labour in Asia, we were tremendously impressed by the number and variety of machines being used by Japanese farmers, despite the small fields and areas they were working. This was true of this area, although we did see several little old ladies bent nearly double by years of backbreaking work in paddy fields. But by contrast there are the women who have worked, or are working, as "amahs" -- pearl divers, who reputedly "never need a doctor". Their appearance bears out this reputation. Once again disregarding the world of fashion and glamour, they have some of the most lovely faces I saw in Japan. They have rounded heads, cheeks, and bodies, as though the sea has rolled them firm and smooth like the pebbles on the beaches where they spend their lives. And contrary to my expectation, they have soft complexions the colour of chestnut/peach.

We left the bus at Nakiri on the Pacific coast and watched the divers at work. First, from the top of the lighthouse where we could see the grace of their movements beneath the clear sea. Then, when we had descended the lighthouse and reclaimed our shoes, which we had to discard for slippers even to climb those stone steps, we went down to a beach to watch the divers bring in their catch. While in the water the women always wear an all-white outfit: a triangular headscarf tied under the chin, a mask over it, and a long sleeved tunic to thigh level. Round their waists they tie a rope which is attached to a small wooden barrel in which to deposit their catch, and the seascape becomes dotted with these barrels while legs and feet flash in the air and disappear neatly beneath the water. Fairly near the shore, the women dive in pairs or small groups, while further out to sea they work from boats and are hauled up from the greater depths by men who operate the boats.

Their mornings work finished, we watched them climb back into the boats or come ashore. The group on the beach immediately lit a fire and transformed themselves from graceful, lithe, and almost mysterious sea nymphs, into nubby little fisherfolk -- merely by discarding their white suits and donning long dark wrap-around skirts, loose jackets, and bonnetlike scarves. Then, with their whites scattered around them drying in the sun they ate their lunch, raw shellfish from their barrels -- chattering, laughing humans of the sea, sun and seaweed depths.





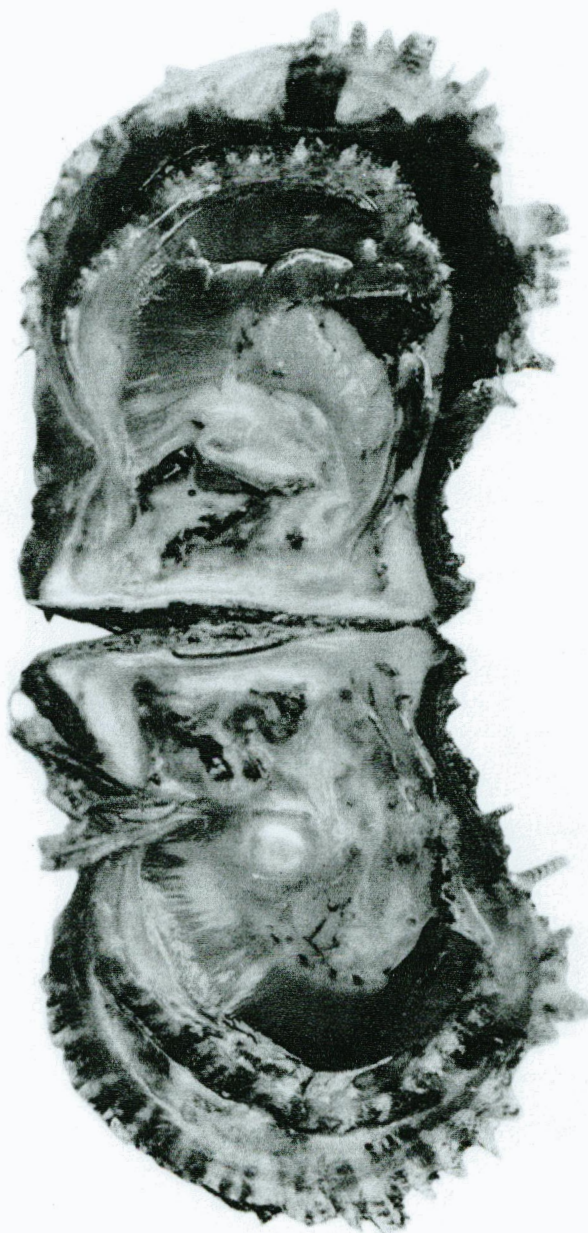


The urgency and demands of fashion and business may not seem realistic on a brief visit to the Ise-Shima Peninsula, but the demands of skill, patience and sheer hard work to produce the wonderful pearl are immediately apparent.

Yours sincerely,

*Brenda Oldham*

Mrs. C.H.G. Oldham.



Photographs from Cultured Pearl

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