

## Founder of Button Industry Succumbs at Local Hospital

**JOHN BOEPPLE PASSED AWAY  
AT BELLEVUE HOSPITAL  
TUESDAY AFTERNOON.**

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### **INTERESTING LIFE**

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**Came from Germany With Secret of  
Manufacturing of Pearl Buttons from Fresh  
Water Mussels – Establishes Industry, but  
Meets Misfortunes.**

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John F. Boepple, founder of the fresh water pearl industry, passed away suddenly at the Bellevue hospital on Tuesday Afternoon shortly before 4 o'clock, his death being caused by softening of the brain, and followed an illness of many months. It was realized that the condition of the once prominent Muscatine man was precarious, and no hopes had been entertained for his recovery, but it was not known yesterday that his death was imminent.

Mr. Boepple was first removed to the West Hill Institution on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, suffering from blood poison, and since that time he received the most considerate and careful treatment, but his malady was one for which there could be found no cure, and realizing that his life was slowly ebbing away, every effort

was made to ameliorate, as far as possible any suffering on the part of the patient.

The announcement of the death of the hardy old pioneer in the button industry will be received with sorrow by those who have known him through his residence in this locality of about a quarter of a century, and followed him through his trials, his achievements and his failures. The founder of an industry which has brought considerable wealth to many he died possessing but little of the world's goods. He at one time owned a button plant of some size in this city and took an active part in the manufacture of pearl buttons but this position he was later forced to forfeit. His business activities covering a period of a number of years, were not fortunate and during the declining years of his life he occupied but a small place in the industry which he established. During the past two years he had been employed as a shell expert at the government biological station at Fairport, Iowa, and his investigations of the southern shell beds and experiments with shells of various types found throughout the country were of benefit to the industry, determining as it did the commercial value of mussels of every variety.

### **Life is Interesting.**

A history of the life of Mr. Boepple, as is the life of the pioneers in all lines of endeavor is of absorbing interest. Coming to America in the 80's as an emigrant from the Fatherland and at first working on a farm in the vicinity of Columbus Junction, he arose in prominence and while after more than a score of years of business activity, he is found to be in comparatively poor circumstances, still his

name will be forever connected with the great industry which he established. A study of his life shows the lights and shadows which fall across the pathway of those who depart from the beaten path.

Mr. Boepple according to those who knew him when he first came to Muscatine followed the occupation of a horn turner in Germany, and was not a worker in the sea shell trade as many supposed. He came to America in the year 1887 with the emigrant tide and located near Columbus Junction where he secured employment on a farm. One day while walking along the banks of the Iowa river he picked up a fresh water Mussel shell and as he beheld it he realized the possibilities which it unfolded. Whether he at the time dreamed that the industry which his discovery would be the incentive for establishing would attain the importance which it has, is not known.

At any rate Mr. Boepple at once determined to experiment on the fresh water shell. He accordingly rigged up a machine built upon similar lines to that used himself in the Fatherland to cut ornaments from horns, and on a foot lathe he cut the first buttons from fresh water clam shell. Encouraged by the result of his experiments he came to Muscatine and without a cent in his pocket walked the streets of the city interviewing many Muscatine people in the hope of securing sufficient capital to carry on the experiments and to manufacture fresh water pearls. He was referred to Wm. Molis, who was at that time the superintendent of the Muscatine Water Works. When he appeared at the old office of the water works he found Mr. Molis an interested listener, and was asked to return again in the evening. Mr Molis advancing him sufficient to allow him to purchase his first supper in Muscatine. That evening Mr. Molis decided to provide him the necessary support and advanced the founder \$15.00 to meet the

expense of shipping his crude machine from Columbus Junction to Muscatine.

### **Form Partnership.**

On January 26, 1891, Mr. Molis entered into a partnership with John Boepple, and Mr. Molis today displayed the original agreement signed by the two men. Early that year Mr. Molis traveled to Newark, N. J. where he purchased twelve machines constructed for cutting of blanks from seashells. It was not found to be economical to use the eastern machine, however, and local machinists were put to work to perfect a machine which would be of greater use in the new-born industry. L.A. Kerr succeeded in making a machine patterned after the seashell cutter, which it was found was a great improvement upon the eastern model, and in the fall of 1891, he was taken into the partnership, a company being formed.

The first button factory was located in the basement of the Davis cooper shop on Cedar street, and here the eastern machine was operated. Later the plant was removed to the building now occupied by the Nester blacksmith shop and with the advent of Mr. Kerr into the affairs of the concern, the factory was located at his machine shop. A short time after this a disagreement occurred and the company was dissolved. Mr. Boepple then erected a small factory at the corner of Sixth and Linn streets, where from three to twelve men were given employment. A few years later, H.W. Hutting became interested in the industry and Mr. Boepple was secured to manage the factory which was started at the corner of Third and Oak streets. This was first known as the Boepple button company and afterwards became known as the Pioneer plant. Mr. Boepple remained actively connected with the Boepple plant in the east part of the city for about six years, after which time he became estranged from the button business.

After twelve years of activity in the industry which he established, he found that no place had been reserved for him, and he did not possess the good fortune to again attain any position of prominence in the business. A dreamer of dreams, he found no place for himself in the realities of the commercialism which predominated the industry, a child of his brain. The business which he founded always supported him, however, and in his declining days he was given the opportunity of being of benefit to the industry through his connection with the biological station at Fairport, as a shell expert. He had a couple of machines in a shed at the rear of his home in the river hamlet, where he tested the shell which were gathered by him on his expeditions made under the government's auspices.

#### **Others Follow.**

With the feasibility of the undertaking once established by Mr. Boepple, the initiative was followed rapidly by others, until the ocean shells have been practically displaced as the raw materials for pearl button manufacture. In the nineties, button factories sprang up in Muscatine like mushrooms. Plants employing a dozen or a score of men were located in barns and small buildings in various parts of the City. The early existence of the industry was wavering until fostered by the protective policy of the American tariff and strengthened by the gradual development of the modern automatic machinery, it gained a certain foothold and grew to surprising proportions. The latter factor, chiefly the automatic machine has accelerated the growth of the industry in a remarkable degree. The past fifteen years has witnessed the small shop displaced by the large industrial institutions, although many small cutting plants are still operated. Practically all of the pearl buttons machinery is manufactured in Muscatine and the past few years the Barry Manufacturing company has shipped thousands

of machines to the east, where a number of large factories are now operating. The industry established by Mr. Boepple has been the chief industrial pursuit of this city, and a little more than a year ago upwards of 3,000 persons were employed in the local factories.

#### **Family Life**

John F. Boepple was born in Germany on July 23, 1854. He resided in Ottensen near Hamburg and here he learned the trade of horn turner, a knowledge of which allowed him to solve the problem of the newer industry. He was united in marriage while quite young but his wife and daughter, Miss Minnie resided with him at Fairport. He is also survived by a step daughter, Miss Christine Nebling of Davenport and Mrs. Theodore F Krueger, a sister at Petersburg, Ill. also mourns his death as do two brothers and three sisters residing in Germany. No arrangements have been made for the funeral as yet.

#### **Excellent Workman**

Mr. Boepple was an excellent type of skilled German workman of the old school, methodical, persevering, industrious, and thorough in the performance of his work. He was kind hearted and generous to a fault and was well liked by those whom he included in his chosen circle of friends.

As the leading figure for years in the button business in this country, Mr. Boepple had some varying experiences ranging from highly honorable to peculiar and laughable. When the author of the Dingley tariff was preparing that bill, Mr. Boepple was called to Washington through the agency of the Hon. G M. Curtis. He was considered to be an authority on that matter and for the entire day he advised and consulted with Mr. Dingley. In his visit to Washington Mr. Boepple had the pleasure of meeting and talking with President

William McKinley. He found the chief executive greatly interested in the new industry and the permanence of his interest is attested in letters which Mr. Boepple received from the president regarding the business.

