

# Australia's multicultural pearling industry - 1

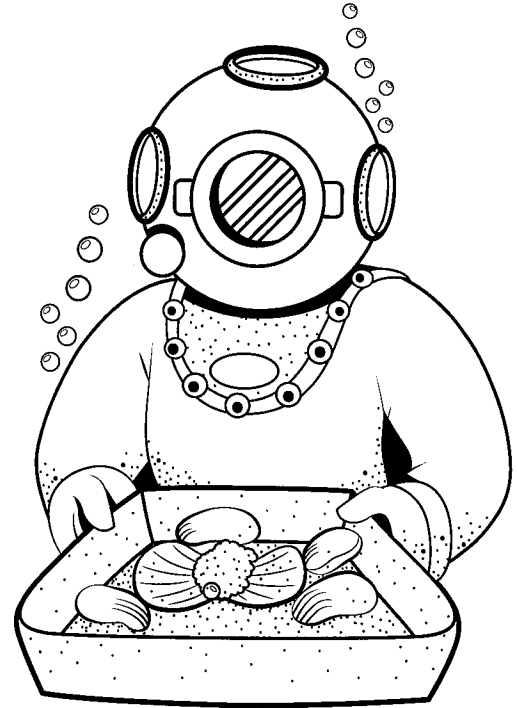
**Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Australia's pearling industry has survived the Great Depression of the 1930s, the disastrous cyclone of 1935, the fallout of two world wars and the invention of the plastic button. Producing 60% of the world's South Sea cultured pearls, the industry now plays a significant role in the country's economy. But who have been the faces behind this exclusive business?**

In the 1860s when the industry began, European pearling masters employed Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders to collect the oyster shells from the shallow waters. They were paid for how much they collected and it wasn't long before the shallow water supplies disappeared. It was then necessary for them to dive into deep water for their bounty. This was called 'naked diving' as they wore no mask or snorkel, nor did they have an air supply.

Indigenous women, who had a greater lung capacity than men, were able to remain underwater for longer. But reluctant to work for the European masters, the women were often kidnapped and held captive on luggers from which they were forced to dive for shells. A statue has been erected on the foreshore of Roebuck Bay, WA, to acknowledge the women's contribution to the pearling industry.

When diving suits were introduced, the divers could search in deeper water and spend much longer underwater. As they would not wear the suits, the Indigenous people were no longer of interest to the pearling masters. Instead, divers from Japan, Malaysia, China, the Philippines, Indonesia and Greece were employed. The Japanese became known as the most successful 'helmet' divers.

Diving has always been dangerous. 'Naked divers' often drowned as they tried



to stay underwater for too long, to collect as many shells as possible, and there was always the risk of a shark attack.

Deep-sea divers often suffered from eye and ear infections as well as the 'bends'. In the early days of pearling, the effects of rising too quickly from deep water were not realised. If caught out on the open sea, the small luggers stood no chance of withstanding the force of a cyclone and the lives of all on board could be lost.

The cemetery in Broome, Western Australia has large Japanese and Chinese sections indicating how many people from these nations perished in this high-risk industry.

Since the end of World War II, the dangers of pearl shell diving have all but been eliminated with the advent of cultured pearls.

The division between the wealthy pearling masters and the poor Asian divers was noticeable by their accommodation. The Europeans lived in spacious bungalows nestled in landscaped gardens, while their employees were mostly confined to overcrowded temporary dwellings of corrugated iron construction.

Today, the town of Broome is a living testament to the industry's multicultural past.