Mussel Mud – Harvest

Due to the acidity of Prince Edward Island soil, many of the vital nutrients and organic material that are necessary for successful farming are quickly depleted.

In order for Island farmers to maintain fertile and productive land fertilizer and lime need to be constantly added to soil to counteract the high acid levels. In the early years of Island farming, mussel mud was spread on the fields to fill this need.

Community Museums Association of PEI.

By the 1800s, industrious farmers were taking to the frozen bays and rivers to cut holes in the ice to access the rich mud at the bottom. The ice would be used for food preservation in the warmer months and mussel mud would be extracted from the holes.

Confederation Centre Art Gallery.
Farmers used horse-powered diggers to lift the heavy mud from the bottom of the rivers and bays. The mud was then loaded onto sleighs and transported back to farms.  
*Confederation Centre Art Gallery.*

The mud was taken from the rivers in a large scoop that is designed to effectively cut into the riverbeds.  
*Community Museums Association of PEI.*

Standing on the digger's platform, one or two could guide the scoop and control the direction and dumping of the fork.  
*Confederation Centre Art Gallery.*
As the horse walked in circles around the capstan, the fork would be raised and lowered with the use of a chain and pulley. Each time the fork was released, it would fall back to the bottom of the river. Another load of mud would then be raised and dumped onto the sleigh.
Community Museums Association of PEI.

It took five or six scoops of mud from the diggers to fill a sleigh, which was then taken back to the farm. In some cases farmers had to travel huge distances between their farms and rivers, which meant they could only bring home one load per day. As a result, farmers often piled their loads on the shore and returned for them in the summer.

Sleighs or wagons full of mud were brought to fields where farmers would shovel it off spread it o and farmers would spread it over the land by hand.
The task of spreading the mud was very strenuous. It took a great deal of time and effort to complete a field because in many cases there were upwards of 40 sleigh loads per acre.

Farmers never disputed the effect mussel mud had on their land. It was often said that wheat grew a foot higher in fields fertilized with the mud compared to areas where no mud added at all.