Mussel Mud History

It wasn't long after the first farms were established on Prince Edward Island that it was realized the soil would need constant replenishment in order to maintain its level of fertility and productiveness.

Much of the Island farmland was losing fertility nearly as fast as it could be cleared. Some fields were almost barren by the time a farmer had all his land cleaned.

In response to the loss of nutrients in the soil, Island farmers began adding manure to their fields to replenish the soil and ensure it yielded a successful harvest. Many different types of manure were tried but it was Mussel Mud that would become the most popular.

Confederation Centre Art Gallery
The name Mussel Mud, which became popular in the late 1800s, does not correctly describe its contents. Although there are some mussel shells, the primary component is oyster shells. *Community Museums Association of PEI.*

Digging Mussel Mud quickly became a winter activity and considered just as important as the cutting of winter wood. *Confederation Centre Art Gallery*

Each winter dozens of diggers could be spotted on various bays and rivers all over the Island. *Confederation Centre Art Gallery*
Along with the diggers, countless farmers could also be seen hauling loads of the lime-rich mud to their farms where it was then spread on their fields. 

Confederation Centre Art Gallery

Some of these farmers travelled many hours to the digger locations. Those who were a long way from home would pile mud on the shoreline and collect it later in the year. This allowed them to haul several loads of mud from the water each day.

Confederation Centre Art Gallery

By the early 1900s there were many people on the Island involved in the harvesting of Mussel Mud, including the provincial government. It set up a delivery system to get the mud to farmers who were too far away from where the digging took place. 

Confederation Centre Art Gallery
Throughout the 1900s other forms of fertilizers became available and the practice of digging Mussel Mud eventually decreased substantially. 

*Confederation Centre Art Gallery*

There were several attempts to bring back the practice but most amounted to little more then brief revivals. 

*Keir Memorial Museum.*

In many of the later attempts to revive the industry, tractors powered the diggers instead of horses. 

*Keir Memorial Museum.*
As it did in the early days of digging mud the later projects stirred up all sorts of controversy between diggers and oyster fishermen. In the early 1900s oyster fishermen blamed their poor catches on the activities of the mud diggers.

Keir Memorial Museum.

There were several reasons for the decline of mud digging on PEI including the fact cheaper fertilizer could be bought from the Mainland and the task of digging mud was very strenuous. The major factor was that for the first several years in the field the mud caused potatoes to scab.

Department of Agriculture.

The scabbing did not make the potatoes uneatable but it did make them unsightly. This was not a problem when farmers were consuming their own potatoes but unpleasant potatoes were unmarketable in the growing commercial industry.

Department of Agriculture.